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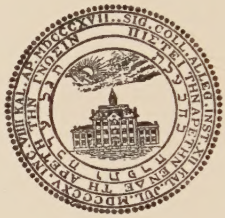

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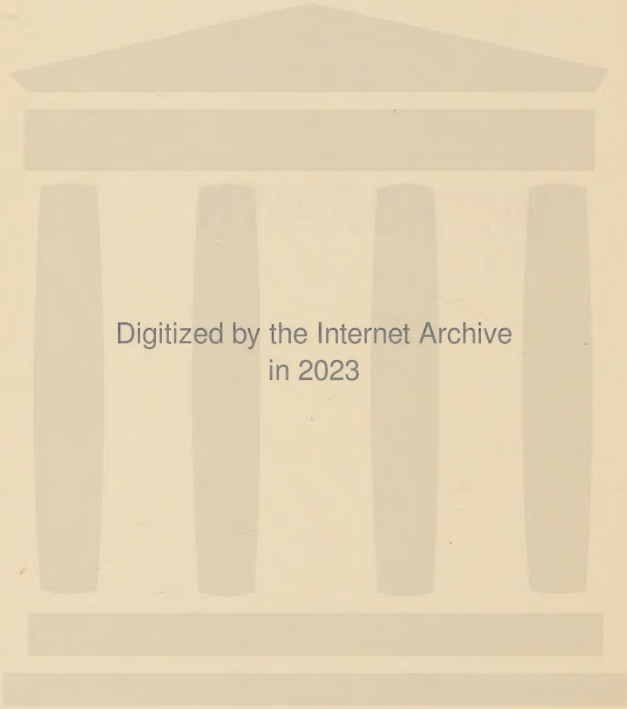
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LESSING'S *LAOKOON*

By

FRED O. NOLTE

LANCASTER, PA.

1940

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For it is better to speak of beautiful thoughts and forms with incertitude than to be forever silent.—ANATOLE FRANCE.

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Whether the faculty of literary criticism is the best gift that Heaven has in its treasures I cannot say; but Heaven seems to think so, for assuredly it is the gift most charily bestowed. Orators and poets, sages and saints and heroes, if rare in comparison with blackberries, are commoner than returns of Halley's comet: literary critics are less common. And when, once in a century, or once in two centuries, the literary critic does appear—will some one in this home of mathematics tell what are the chances that his appearance will be made among that small number of people who are called classical scholars? If this purely accidental conjunction occurred so lately as the eighteenth century in the person of Lessing, it ought to be a long while before it occurs again.—A. E. Housman.

One great charm of Greek literature is that . . . it does not speak quite like a book. It is thinking aloud. It debates with itself as with an antagonist; as soon as it becomes articulate it puts the dialectical process before us in vivid and dramatic form.—S. H. Butcher.

Ein anderes ist der Altertumskrämer; ein anderes der Altertumskundige. Jener hat die Scherben, dieser den Geist des Altertums geerbt.—Lessing.

Was den Wert Lessings ausmacht, ist die Vereinigung des Kunstsinns mit der Logik. Es ist zwar weder der Kunstsinn so rein, noch die Logik immer so echt; aber in dieser Vereinigung sind sie vielleicht noch nie dagewesen; ja gewöhnlich schliessen sie sich sogar aus.—Grillparzer.

Vielleicht gibt es ein Reich der Weisheit, aus dem der Logiker verbannt ist.—NIETZSCHE.

Uebrigens ist jede Methode bestreitbar und keine allgültig.—JAKOB BURCKHARDT.

Lessing war der höchste Verstand, und nur ein ebenso grosser konnte von ihm wahrhaft lernen. Dem Halbvermögen war er gefährlich.—GOETHE.

C'est que l'homme qui l'a écrit possédait deux choses sans lesquelles il n'est pas de critique sérieuse: des principes fermement arrêtés et une passion très ardente.—FRANCISQUE SARCEY.

I

LESSING'S DEMONSTRATION

"It is one of the prerogatives of the ancients," Lessing writes in his *Laokoon* preface, "to have preserved a just mean in all things." His demonstration continues:

Even though Simonides defined painting as silent poetry and poetry as articulate painting, this definition is not to be found in a Greek textbook. Both with regard to "the objects and the manner of the imitation," the two arts were clearly differentiated by the ancients. Latter-day criticism has, however, disregarded this distinction, and has tended to mislead the artists themselves. "It has engendered, in poetry, a mania for description and, in painting, a penchant for excessive allegorizing." This "false taste" and the "unwarranted principles," which are implied, should be counteracted.

According to Winckelmann, "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" are the predominant characteristics of Greek art. To support his argument, Winckelmann cites the Laocoon statue, and observes that the father in this work "raises no frightful cries," such as those recorded by Virgil

in his treatment of the same episode. "Laocoon suffers," Winckelmann writes, "but he suffers like Sophocles' Philoctetes—his agony pierces our souls, yet we wish that we might endure agony as this man does."

But, we may well query, does this analogy hold? How *does* Philoctetes suffer? Certainly not in silence nor with Stoic repression. He freely gives vent to his suffering; and this, moreover, is a common practice among the heroes of Greek literature. Hence, if the Laocoon of the statue, in contrast to the figure in Virgil's poem, is represented as not crying aloud, the reason must be other than the one Winckelmann assigns.

This reason is, in fact, to be found in the nature and purpose of the art in question. Beauty was the supreme aim of Greek artists, and all effects which were inconsistent with this aim were either tempered or eliminated. It was for this reason that Timanthes, in his painting of Iphigenia's sacrifice, has Agamemnon conceal his face: the extreme suffering expressed on the father's countenance would have been incompatible with the artist's aim. "This concealment, in short, is a sacrifice which the artist has made to beauty."

It is this same fundamental consideration which prevailed in the creation of the Laocoon statue. "The master was working toward the highest

beauty under the accepted conditions of physical pain. The latter, in all its distorting violence, was not to be combined with the former. He, accordingly, had to tone it down; he had to temper crying aloud to sighing, not because crying aloud reveals an ignoble soul, but because it distorts the face in a loathsome manner. . . . The mere wide opening of the mouth is . . . in painting, a blotch and, in sculpture, a hollow which has the most untoward effect in the world."

There is a further reason why the enlightened artist, who can depict but a single moment, should not represent the "highest point" of an action. It is to his purpose to choose the most "fruitful moment"; and "that alone is fruitful which permits free play to the imagination. The more we see, the more we must be able to add in thought. The more we add in thought, the more we must believe we see. In the whole course of an emotion, there is, however, no moment which is less favorable than the highest stage. Beyond it, there is nothing more; and to present the extreme to our sight is tantamount to binding the wings of our fancy and obliging it, since it cannot transcend the sensuous impression, to occupy itself with weaker images below the level of the latter. . . . Thus, if Laocoon sighs, our imagination can hear him cry aloud. But, if he cries aloud, then it can climb neither a

step higher than this representation, nor a step lower without picturing him in a more passive, hence more uninteresting state. Either it hears him merely moaning, or it sees him already dead.

"Furthermore, inasmuch as this single moment acquires, through art, an invariable duration, it must not represent anything which cannot be considered as other than transitory. . . .

"Nothing, on the other hand, obliges the poet to confine his painting to a single moment. He begins each of his actions, if it so pleases him, with its origin and conducts it, through all possible variations, to its conclusion." Since he is not restricted to a single aspect, he is permitted a far greater range in the transitory representation of any particular aspect, for this representation is qualified and tempered by that which precedes as well as that which follows. "Virgil's Laocoon cries aloud; but this crying Laocoon is precisely the same man whom we already know and cherish as the most prudent patriot and the most affectionate father. We associate his cries, not with his character, but only with his intolerable suffering."

Far from censuring Virgil, we should praise him. The deviation of his representation from that in the statue is thoroughly justified: the poet, as well as the sculptor, is using the means which are most consistent with the exigencies of his particular art.

"If we say that the artist is imitating the poet or the poet is imitating the artist, our statement can signify two different things. Either the one is making the work of the other the actual object of his imitation; or they both have the same object of imitation, and the one borrows from the other the style and manner of imitating it. . . . In the first type of imitation, the poet is original; in the second, he is a copyist. The former type is an aspect of that general imitation which constitutes the nature of his art; and he is working in the capacity of a genius, no matter whether his subject is a work of another art or of nature. The latter type, however, is beneath his dignity: instead of imitating things themselves, he imitates an imitation of them, and passes off frigid reminiscences of the qualities of an alien genius as original qualities of his own."

Spence, in his *Polymetis*, sought to establish agreements between "the works of the Roman poets and the remains of ancient artists." As a result, he has written a treatise which, despite its classical erudition, is intolerable to every discriminating reader. It is, indeed, lamentable "that so useful a book, as *Polymetis* might otherwise have been, should, through the ill-advised whim of substituting, for the characteristic imagination of the ancient poets, familiarity with an alien imagination,

have become so distasteful and far more detrimental to classical authors than the insipid commentaries of the most superficial philologists could ever have been. . . . With regard to the reciprocal resemblance of poetry and painting, Spence has the most extraordinary notions. He believes that both arts, in the opinion of the ancients, were so intimately allied that they constantly went hand in hand, and that the artist never lost sight of the poet, nor the poet of the artist. That poetry is the more extensive art; that there are, at its disposal, beauties which painting is incapable of achieving; that there are frequently reasons why it should prefer non-pictorial to pictorial beauties—these things do not seem to have occurred to him at all. Accordingly, when he observes the slightest discrepancy between ancient poets and artists, he is faced by such a dilemma that he has recourse to the most curious evasions in the world."

Spence should have realized that these poets and artists, although they dealt with similar subjects, interpreted their material in the manner most becoming to the representative qualities of their respective mediums. "Gods and spiritual beings, as represented by the artist, are not altogether the same as those treated by the poet. For the artist, they are personified abstractions which must constantly preserve identical characteristics if they are

to be recognized. For the poet, however, they are real active beings which, in addition to their general nature, possess other qualities and emotions which, according to the circumstances of the occasion, may dominate. . . . If painting is inclined to be the sister of poetry, she is at least not an envious sister; and the younger does not deny to the older all the adornments which are not becoming to herself. . . .

"A feminine figure with a bridle in her hands, a second one leaning against a pillar: these, in art, are allegorical beings. As represented by the poet, temperance and constancy are, however, not allegorical beings, but only personified abstractions.

"In the case of the artist, necessity has invented the symbols of these beings. For he cannot indicate in any other manner what this or that figure is supposed to signify. But what necessity prescribes for the artist, why should the poet allow this to be imposed upon him when he is never confronted by such necessity?"

Caylus, no less than Spence, recommends that "the poet adorn his imaginative creations with allegorical attributes." Furthermore, he raises even more questionable considerations. It is his opinion that the artist "should become more intimately acquainted with the greatest pictorial poet, with Homer, with this second nature. He shows him what a wealth of unused material for

the most impressive descriptions is offered in the story treated by the Greek author, and indicates that his execution will, of necessity, be all the more successful, the closer he is able to adhere to the slightest circumstance observed by the poet.

"In this recommendation there is, as a result, the twofold imitation which has been differentiated above. The artist not only should imitate that which the poet imitates, but should also imitate it with identical traits. He should exploit the poet not only as a narrator; he should also exploit him as a poet."

But is this advice sound? If Homer's works were lost, could we form an adequate opinion, not only of his comprehensive, but also of his pictorial qualities as a poet? Far from it. Various examples show that famous scenes, as represented in the *Iliad*, are altogether unsuited for treatment by the artist.

"If this is the case; if, moreover, a poem can be very serviceable to the painter and yet not be pictorial in itself; if, on the other hand, a second poem can be very pictorial and yet not be serviceable to the painter, then there is no basis for Caylus' notion, which would make utility for the painter the touchstone for poets, and would grade the latter according to the number of pictures they provide for the artist."

But let us break off our argument at this point, and try to "deduce the matter from its first principles." Our conclusions are these. "If it is true that painting, for its imitations, employs altogether different means or symbols than poetry, the former, to be precise, employing figures and colors in space, the latter, on the other hand, articulated sounds in time; if, indisputably, the symbols must maintain a convenient relation to that which is signified, then juxtaposed symbols can express only juxtaposed objects or objects whose parts are juxtaposed; successive symbols, on the other hand, can only express objects which are successive or whose parts are successive.

"Objects which are juxtaposed, or whose parts are juxtaposed, are called bodies. Hence, bodies with their visual qualities are the specific objects of painting.

"Objects which are successive, or whose parts are successive, are, as such, called actions. Hence, actions are the specific object of poetry.

"Yet all bodies exist, not only in space, but also in time. They have duration; and, in every moment of their duration, they can appear otherwise and stand in other relations. Each of these momentary aspects and relations is the effect of a previous one, and can be the cause of a successive one and, accordingly, the center, so to speak, of an

action. Hence, painting can also imitate actions, but only suggestively, by means of bodies.

"On the other hand, actions cannot subsist in themselves, but must be dependent on certain agents. In so far as these agents are bodies or can be regarded as bodies, poetry also describes bodies, but only suggestively, by means of actions.

"Painting, in its co-extensive compositions, can utilize but a single moment of an action, and, as a result, must choose the most pregnant one, in view of which the preceding and the succeeding action will be most comprehensible.

"Likewise, poetry, in its progressive imitations, can utilize but a single characteristic of bodies, and, as a result, must choose the one which evokes the most sensuous image of a body from the angle which is required.

"From these considerations there is derived the rule for the unity of pictorial epithets and for economy in the description of physical objects.

"I should have little confidence in this dry sequence of syllogisms if I did not find it fully substantiated by the practice of Homer, or, rather, if it were not the practice of Homer which had induced me to formulate it. Only on the basis of these principles can we define and explain the great manner of the Greeks as well as to account for the contrary manner of so many modern poets, who

insist on competing with the painter in a field in which they must, of necessity, be surpassed by him.

"I find that Homer paints nothing but progressive actions and that he paints all objects, all individual things only in view of their connection with these actions, usually only with one trait. . . . For example, if Homer wants to have us see the chariot of Juno, Hebe is obliged to construct it before our eyes, piece by piece. We see wheels, axles, seat, shaft, reins, and traces, not after they are fully assembled, but as they are being assembled by the hands of Hebe. . . . If Homer wants to show us how Agamemnon was dressed, the king is obliged to put on his clothing before our eyes, garment by garment."

In marked contrast to Homer, Haller, in his *Alpen*, gives us faithful, detailed descriptions. "It is herbs and flowers which the learned poet paints with great skill and in keeping with nature. Paints, but paints without the slightest illusion! . . . In every word I detect the laboring poet, but I am far from seeing the thing itself.

"Once more—I do not deny to speech as such the capacity to describe a physical whole, part by part. It can do so because its symbols, although successive, are, on the other hand, arbitrary symbols. But I do deny this capacity to speech as the medium of poetry, inasmuch as such verbal descriptions of

bodies lack that quality of illusion which is the primary aim of poetry. And this quality of illusion must be lacking, I maintain, because the co-existence of the body conflicts with the consecutiveness of the speech; and, as the former is resolved into the latter, the analysis of the whole into its parts is, it is true, facilitated for us; but the final synthesis of these parts into the whole becomes uncommonly difficult and, frequently, impossible. . . .

"Various parts or things which, in nature, I am obliged to survey all at once if they are to form a whole—to recount these to the reader, bit by bit, with the intention of giving him a picture of the whole, constitutes, on the part of the poet, an intrusion into the province of the painter, whereby the poet dissipates considerable imagination to no avail."

It is this sort of recounting that Homer advisedly avoided. The description of Achilles' shield provides an instructive example. "Homer, in point of fact, paints the shield, not as one that is completely finished, but as one that is in the process of being made. We see, not the shield, but the divine master as he constructs the shield."

What has been said of physical bodies as a whole applies even more to beautiful physical bodies. Ariosto's elaborate description of Alcina fails altogether to give us a comprehensive impression of

her beauty. "I see nothing and realize, with distress, the futility of my greatest exertion to see something."

Homer, in an altogether different spirit, refrains from attempting a detailed description of Helen. Instead, when he wants to give us an idea of her surpassing beauty, he has her appear before the old men of Troy and has the latter exclaim it is small wonder that the Trojans and Greeks should suffer dire hardships for such a woman. What could create a more vivid impression of beauty than this verdict of declining age? "Paint for us, poet, the delight, the affection, the love, the ecstasy which beauty stimulates; and you will have painted beauty itself."

There is also another means by which the poet can excel the painter in the description of physical beauty—namely, by changing beauty into grace. For "grace is beauty in motion, and precisely for that reason less convenient for the painter than for the poet."

II

THE SHIFT IN ARGUMENT

Lessing's treatise, as it is resumed above, is an *Erster Teil* of a comprehensive work, which was calculated to comprise three parts. The two uncompleted parts are, however, not to be conjectured as comparable, in scope and significance, to the one which was finished. They would largely have provided—to judge from extant notes and sketches—not new fundamental points of view, but rather an extension, elaboration, and qualification of the principles which had already been so masterfully enunciated. They would presumably have been in the nature of supplements, dealing, moreover, with arts (music, dancing, and pantomime) in which Lessing was decidedly less versed than in poetry, or even sculpture, and in the examination of which he would be able to turn to no familiar guides like Homer and Winckelmann, who had done him such yeoman service in his initial discussion. The loss of these parts is not to be greatly mourned.

Laokoon, in its present form, is anything but a fragment. With the exception of the last few discursive chapters (the main argument is practically concluded at the end of the twenty-first chapter),

it is one of the most shrewdly designed and developed of all critical treatises. As published in the Lachmann-Muncker edition of Lessing's works,[1] it runs to considerably less than two hundred pages. Composed of twenty-nine short chapters, many of them taking up a new tack, it is uncommonly rapid and crisp in its exposition. This, despite the formidable load of archaeological and philological baggage which the author carries on his way.

There is a calculated air of informality about *Laokoon*. ("The logical arrangement of our thoughts," Lessing has elsewhere advised us, "is not always the one in which we communicate them to others." [2]) Lessing takes the reader into his confidence; delights in the role of *causeur*; and, as he alertly explores the taxing intricacies of his problem, disparagingly refers to himself as a mere "stroller." [3] The reader should not be deceived. Lessing's attitude is anything but casual. If he can assume the air of a stroller, it is because he has so carefully surveyed the ground that he is thoroughly familiar with it. He is not treading strange soil; he is completely at home in a garden he has long cultivated. It is only the *arriviste* who has to insist on tedious rigor and formality. Lessing's is the ease and assurance of a master.

[1] Hereafter referred to as *LM*.
[2] *LM*., XIII, 110.
[3] Ch. 20.

Nothing could be more misleading than Lessing's assertion, in the preface, that he is providing "unorganized *collectanea* for a book rather than a book." *Laokoon* is the mature product of some ten years of recurrent inquiry and reflection. In no other treatise did Lessing so effectively allow the material to shape itself and settle in his mind; in no other work did he so vigorously adapt and point the means to the end; in none of his plays did he ever prepare the entrance for a character or an episode as surely and as dramatically as he set the stage for chapter sixteen of *Laokoon*.

This justly famous chapter is, indeed, "staged." Like the parable scene in *Nathan der Weise*, it is impressively introduced in a carefully designed setting. But the very dramatic quality of the utterance in this passage, the measured procession of Lessing's ideas, the sharply arranged contour and symmetry of his paragraphs, the stirring enunciation of his propositions, sounded with the precision of the ejaculation of trumpet thrusts—all these imply a disregard for various fine distinctions which the author had previously developed. Beginning with chapter sixteen, there is, in fact, an altogether different tendency and spirit in Lessing's argument; and it is largely with this chapter and those immediately following that the most insistent objections have been, and are to be, raised.

During the first fifteen chapters, Lessing is, on the whole, intent on enlarging the province of the poet. He demonstrates that both Virgil and Sophocles are justified in their transgression of the limitations imposed by the standards of Winckelmann; he protests against the chaining of the imagination of the ancient poets to the statues of the artists, as suggested by Spence; and he refuses to confine Homer's descriptions to the restricted area sanctioned by Caylus' "touchstone." These chapters, indeed, constitute a plea, at once generous and discriminate, for the most effective exercise of literary freedom. It is the integrity of poetic expression with which Lessing is most concerned.

But, thereupon, his attitude is very different. The shift is a full one from induction to deduction. After defending the poet against the sweeping legislation of others, Lessing now proceeds to lay down a set of general laws on his own behalf. And the reader inevitably feels, from this point on, that Lessing is less concerned with the integrity of poetic expression than he is with the ordination of his own neatly formulated principles. Homer, who had earlier been freed from the confinements of a foreign standard, now becomes a "touchstone" himself. At first, Lessing views Homer's epics in the full range of all poetry; in the end, he examines all poetry in the restricted light of Homer's epics.

In chapter sixteen, Lessing limits the poet, not only with regard to method, but also with regard to the "object" which is "imitated": "actions" alone are suited to the poet's treatment; and "bodies," which are suited to treatment by the artist, can be poetically painted only by means of actions. But, in chapter seven, Lessing had found that the artist and the poet could legitimately imitate, not only the same object, but even the work of each other. It was their method alone which had to be different. And, in chapter fourteen, he holds that poetic painting is quite feasible and is achieved if the poet approximates "that degree of illusion which material painting is capable of and which is primarily and most readily derived from material painting."

This, aesthetically, is Lessing's most liberal statement with regard to the possibilities of poetic painting; and, in spirit, it is quite different from the strictures which he later imposes. The poet is frankly allowed to compete with the painter; there is no confinement of his method to one angle and a single attribute; he is not instructed to paint a body only by means of action; and the end toward which he aims is not reproduction but illusion. It would have been enlightening if Lessing had examined more closely this quality of illusion—the characteristic effects which the poet has in mind. Such an

examination would have revealed that the poet's range is incomparably greater than Lessing was later disposed to grant.

Lessing's most pertinent discussion of artistic methods is to be found in those passages in which he provides a corrective to Winckelmann. Accepting the very example adduced by the latter, he examines the Laocoon legend in the respective patterns of sculpture and poetry. His argument at this point is a classic example of precise aesthetic analysis; and it is here that he thinks most surely and clearly with the mediums of the poet and the artist in mind. Subsequently, when he had his own formulas before the eye of the reader, he is inclined to subordinate aesthetic observation to rationalized demonstration. After placing reason at the service of art, he puts art at the command of reason.

III

LESSING DISMISSES THE AMATEUR

The opening paragraphs of *Laokoon* are highly important for an understanding of Lessing's attitude and method. They read:

"The first person who compared painting and poetry to each other was a man of sensitive feeling, who perceived that both arts had a similar effect upon him. Both, he felt, represent things, which are absent, as present; both represent semblance as reality; both give an illusion; and, in both cases, the illusion is pleasing.

"A second person sought to investigate the nature of this pleasure and discovered that, in both cases, it derived from the same source. Beauty, the concept of which we must first abstract from physical bodies, has general laws, which may be applied to many things—to actions and thoughts, as well as to forms.

"A third person, who examined the value and distribution of these general laws, observed that some of them prevailed more in painting, others more in poetry; and that, as a result, in the case of the latter, poetry, by virtue of examples and elucidations, could throw light on painting; and, in the

case of the former, painting, in like manner, could throw light on poetry.

"The first person was an amateur; the second, a philosopher; the third, a critic."

With these introductory words, Lessing, who reserves for himself the role of critic, frankly disclaims the titles of amateur and philosopher. As regards the first of these titles, Lessing's attitude was well-advised. He was never an amateur, a "lover," in any full sense of the word. Sheer beauty, whether in art, nature, or woman—*Ich habe nie eine Schöne göttlich genannt*—never fascinated him. He was, at heart, not a disciple of beauty, but an apostle of truth. In a letter, he confidentially wrote: "You are, indeed, right. Only a part of our youth should be devoted to *belles-lettres*; there are more important things to turn our hands to before we die. An old man who has spent his whole life doing nothing but rhyming, and an old man who has spent his whole life doing nothing but blowing his breath into a piece of wood with holes in it—with regard to such old men, I doubt very much whether they have fulfilled their mission in life." [1] In a comparable tone, he argued in *Laokoon*: "We laugh when we are told that, among the ancients, the arts were also subject to civil legislation. But our laughter is not always justified. It is indisputable

[1] To Mendelssohn, "December," 1757.

that laws should not be permitted to arrogate to themselves power over the sciences, for the aim of science is truth. Truth is indispensable to our souls; and it is tyranny to impose upon these the least restriction in the satisfaction of this fundamental need. The aim of the arts, however, is pleasure; and pleasure is dispensable. Hence, it may very well be left to the discretion of the legislator what sort of pleasure and to what degree each sort of pleasure is to be sanctioned." [2]

Der Endzweck der Künste hingegen ist Vergnügen; und das Vergnügen ist entbehrlich! Lessing's confession virtually allows him to lapse into the arms of Philistinism. That pleasure, or delight, is the specific aim of art will hardly be denied. It all depends on the quality we assign to such pleasure. *Ernst ist das Leben, heiter ist die Kunst.* It was precisely in the serenity and blitheness of art that Schiller could recognize its triumph over life, the purity and transcendence of its revelation. Aesthetic delight, he felt, is not only indispensable to man; it is the very embodiment of his humanity: "man is truly human only in so far as he plays." But Lessing was unprepared to discern a deeply significant distinction between aesthetic and ordinary pleasure. It is his second clause—"pleasure is dispensable"—that shocks and disappoints us.

[2] Ch. 2.

Lessing's loins were always girt. Life, for him, was a serious and strenuous endeavor; it was to be clearly faced and ruggedly dealt with. He had little interest in play and little time for relaxation; when he gambled the sweat stood out in great beads on his forehead—it was, not a form of indulgence, but rather a physical and mental workout. Dreams, he has assured us, were unknown to him, either figuratively or literally. Just as he would have ascribed to Socrates' confession: "The fields and woods have nothing to teach me; I learn my lessons from men," so he would have concurred with the same great Athenian that the dreamless is the highest state of mind:

> Begreifst du aber
> Wieviel *andächtig schwärmen* leichter als
> *Gut handeln* ist?[3]

Keats could fascinatingly write: "This morning I am in a sort of temper, indolent and supremely careless. . . . My passions are all asleep, from having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness. If I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lilies I should call it languor; but as I am I must call it laziness." [4] Such a romantic mood, with its seductive blandish-

[3] *Nathan der Weise*, act I, scene 2.

[4] Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, March 19, 1819.

ments, would have been abhorrent to Lessing. He would have found small delight in a "sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness," still less delight in recording it so alluringly.

Beauty is beguiling; it sheathes our logic, and disarms our protests. But Lessing's mind fed on dialectics; and he found strength in protest. Art calls for acquiescence; it invites us to indulgence and surrender. But Lessing was incapable of such submission; self-surrender was a price he was never prepared to pay. At all times he stoutly insisted on being the captain of his mind; he was unwilling to yield the helm to another spirit, last of all to that strange, enchanting spirit which

> Charmed magic casements opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Lessing could be manly to the point of pedantry. He explicitly referred to the "sensuous image of the concept" as "feminine"; the concept itself he characteristically considered masculine. *Der Begriff ist der Mann!*[5] That is the key-note to Lessing's rugged intellectualism, his austere devotion to reason. Impatiently he exclaims: "He is a fine champion, indeed, who jousts with images and words, and continually acts as if he never saw the concept."

[5] *LM.*, XIII, 190.

Lessing, even in the realm of art, was not moved, as Goethe characteristically was, to develop and enrich his ideas by immediate, sensuous observation. In a passage, which was typical of his life-long attitude, Goethe wrote: "Inasmuch as concept (*Begriff*) and intuition (*Anschauung*) reciprocally promote each other, I was unable to contemplate these new thoughts very long before I was seized with an incessant longing to be, at least for once, face to face with works of art in large numbers." [6] Such longing never possessed Lessing. He wrote his *Laokoon* without, apparently, ever having seen even a cast of the statue which afforded him his title. "In fact," Hettner has written, "Lessing's *Collectanea*, as far as they touch upon formative art, generally refer only to the biographical history of artists, not to the history of art as such." [7] Lessing himself states, in the preface, that his treatise developed "in the course of his readings," not, that is to say, on the basis of an immediate study of art and poetry. Shortly afterwards, Lessing rather incongruously writes: "Baumgarten acknowledged that he owed the greater part of his examples to Gessner's dictionary. Although my reasoning may not be as compelling as Baum-

[6] *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, eighth book.

[7] *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Braunschweig, 1925), III, 2, p. 466.

garten's, my examples will at least smack more of the source."

The Laocoon statue, although it provided a direct refutation of Winckelmann, was hardly a happy choice for Lessing's subsequent argument. This work, as it has frequently been noted, represents a decadent stage in Hellenic art, "a period in which sculpture has begun to aim at effects legitimate, because delightful, only in painting." [8] The undeniable virtuosity of the sculptors merely serves to emphasize the inherent defects of their achievement. The triangular design is too studied; the three figures are juxtaposed rather than assembled —were it not for the confining coils of the serpents, the two lads, notably the younger one, would topple from the group. The fragilely projected arms of all three figures; the intricately bearded and furrowed face of the father; and the aspect of the latter's right leg with five superimposed thicknesses (serpent coil, leg, plus a knot of three additional coils)—sculpturally, all these are as unsatisfactory as they are annoying. As for the elaborately writhing serpents, their marble value is about equal to that of dislocated plumbing.

Lessing was at great pains to establish that the mouth of the father, crying aloud, would have been unaesthetic in sculpture. But what, by the same

[8] Pater, *The Renaissance* (London, 1919), p. 217.

token, are we to think of the widely open jaws of the serpent which is biting the parent in the side? The whole treatment of this complexly detailed and restlessly twisting group was, obviously, less suited for sculpture in the round than for bas-relief, or even fresco. It would have been practically ideal for a wood-cut. Moreover, this same statue, summoned by Lessing as capital evidence, might very well be used to controvert his argument that the artist should not attempt to represent the transitory. Goethe, who carefully and fondly observed the group, compared it to "fixed lightning, a wave petrified at the moment it dashes upon the shore." [9] *Fixierter Blitz!* It would be hard to contrive a more telling figure for a treatment of the transitory.

Nor is the Laocoon statue apt to illustrate Lessing's argument with regard to the "fruitful moment." Even though the father, as Lessing contends, is not crying aloud, his face still represents agony and distress *in extremis*—a fact which both Winckelmann and Goethe noted. Seemingly in conscious contradiction of Lessing, the latter spoke of "the peak of the moment which is represented" —*der Gipfel des vorgestellten Augenblicks*.[10] Certainly, the countenance of the father is too agonized

[9] Cf. W. G. Howard, *Laokoon* (New York, 1910), p. 8. This excellent edition is indispensable to all closer students of Lessing's work.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

and distorted to be accepted as an example of that beauty which Lessing considered the ideal of the Greek and of all truly formative artists. If, notwithstanding, the degree of suffering represented in Laocoon's expression is held to be consistent with this ideal, then Lessing's argument with regard to Timanthes' painting of Iphigenia's sacrifice is far from persuasive. For, aside from the fact that passion and suffering are much more susceptible of treatment in painting than in sculpture, the pain which is expressed by Agamemnon under the circumstances would be less contrary to the requirements of beauty, less distressing to behold, than that of Laocoon—grief is, physically, less agonizing and distorting than torture. In fact, if Agamemnon is made to hide his face, it is, presumably, not because the spectator, as a sensitive observer, could not bear to see it but because Agamemnon himself, as a sensitive parent, could not bear to see his daughter sacrificed. Far from following the dictates of beauty, the artist, apparently, is not even considering an aesthetic principle. He is, rather unhappily, subordinating aesthetic to psychological considerations, and is sacrificing artistic effectiveness to purely human sentiment, or the suggestion of that sentiment. Shrouding the face of an important personage is decidedly less satisfactory as

a pictorial than as a poetic device; on the canvas, it substitutes for expression a mere blank.

That Lessing, in *Laokoon*, failed to differentiate between sculpture and painting, has become a traditional criticism. Lessing, in fact, was perturbed rather than gratified by the warmth and stimulation of the sensuous. He preferred to see things in the "white light of logic" and in the fastness of hard, clear design. Music was painful to him; and he had little appreciation of color. Actually he queried "whether it would not be desirable that the art of oil-painting had never been invented"; and he was capable of concluding that "mere color and transitory expression have no ideal because Nature has proposed to herself nothing definite in them." [11] How different this sounds from Walter Pater who found color "a spirit upon things, by which they become expressive to the spirit." [12] As for the "landscape painter," Lessing writes: "He imitates beauties that are capable of no ideal. He works, therefore, simply with his eye and hand; genius has little or no share in what he does." [13] In so arguing, Lessing reduces the activity of the artist to mere servile copying. The aesthetic ideal, for which Lessing looks in vain, is to be sought, not in nature, but in art itself; it is to be found,

[11] Cf. Blümner, *Lessings Laokoon* (Berlin, 1880), pp. 469, 399.
[12] Cf. Bosanquet, *Three Lectures on Aesthetic* (London, 1931), p. 57.
[13] Blümner, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

not in the quality of the artist's subject, but in the quality of his treatment; and it is to be defined, not in terms of reality, but in terms of the aesthetic medium. Lessing, by insisting that the artist must give us a faithful representation of an ideal that resides in reality, tends to make the painter a mere recorder, and the poet a mere reporter. Even when he speaks of illusion, he essentially has "deception" (*Täuschung*) in mind: it is the "thing" itself which we believe we see or experience. By eliminating the objects of landscape and other "lower" forms of existence from the realm of painting, Lessing is confusing the aesthetic and the purely biological scale.

Lessing was more interested in intellectual inquiry than in aesthetic revelation; and he was incomparably keener in his analysis of an argument than in his interpretation of a work of art or poetry. It was usually critics and critical commentaries that put him on the track of artists and poets. He expressed his regret that he had become familiar with the *Poetics* before he was well acquainted with the "models" on which Aristotle's observations were based.[14] To judge from Lessing's own fragmentary biography of Sophocles (four pages of text and some eighty pages of notes and sub-notes), he was less interested in Sophocles, the dramatist and

[14] *LM.*, VIII, 294.

poet, than in Sophocles, the man; and less interested in Sophocles, the man, than in the various commentaries on him.

Lessing was not fascinated by the immediate manifestation of art or poetry—its sensuous, emotional fulness and its imaginative charm. He preferred to dissect it in order to get at its structure, and to reduce it to its lowest terms. He was primarily interested, not in the flesh and blood, but in the anatomy of art—its bone-work.

IV

THE PHILOSOPHER REMAINS

Lessing's triadic distinction in the first paragraphs of *Laokoon* is reminiscent of a comparable differentiation by Mendelssohn. The latter had written: "The fine arts and sciences are, for the artist, an occupation; for the amateur, a source of pleasure; and, for the philosopher, a school of instruction." And, at the end of the same essay in which this passage occurs, Mendelssohn specifically designates Lessing as a "philosopher." [1] Mendelssohn's ascription of this title to Lessing is more pertinent than the latter's own disclaim of it. In fact, his further definition of Lessing as a writer "familiar enough with the arts to consider their secrets with philosophic eyes" very aptly indicates the qualifications of the author of *Laokoon*.

Lessing's acutely rational mind naturally sought a philosophic orientation of his principles. In *Laokoon*, not only his terminology, but his fundamental outlook was largely governed by Aristotle's theory of "imitation" (*Nachahmung*) and Leibniz's doctrines of "perception" (*Vorstellung*) and "per-

[1] Cf. Howard, *op. cit.*, p. CXXII and p. CXXIX, note.

fection" (*Vollkommenheit*). Unfortunately, Leibniz's rationalism is, *aesthetically*, the least promising of philosophies. For, although the senses may be rationally disparaged as "lower faculties of the mind," and sense perception may be intellectually discredited as "obfuscated," sensuous impressions are, aesthetically, the most unequivocal and radiant of experiences. *Sonnenklar ist nur das Sinnliche!* In the light of poetic and artistic revelation, Feuerbach's assertion is fully justified.

When Lessing, in the guise of one of his disputants, significantly designated "I," avows: "The greatest clarity has always been for me the greatest beauty," [2] he is thinking thoroughly in terms of Leibnizian rationalism. And he is also thinking in these terms when he argues that it is "the perfection of the object itself" [3] which delights in Greek art. This "perfection," which resides in reality and which, to recall, permits of no "ideal" in landscape painting, was, by its very attribution, frequently interpreted on Lessing's part in intellectual and moral, rather than aesthetic values. In the case of Aristotelian *katharsis*, a purely emotional and imaginative process did not suffice him; he sought in it a preparation for "virtuous accomplishments" (*tugendhafte Fertigkeiten*).

[2] *LM.*, XIII, 11.
[3] *Laokoon*, ch. 2.

Possibly the closest Lessing comes to a fundamental consideration of aesthetic composition is to be found in the 70th instalment of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. "In nature everything is bound up with everything; everything crosses and re-crosses; everything interchanges with everything; and every form is transmuted into another. But, in view of this infinite variety, nature is a spectacle only for an infinite mind. In order to have finite minds participate in the joy of this spectacle, these must be endowed with the faculty of prescribing limits, which nature herself does not possess, and with the faculty of directing the attention according to discretion. . . .[4]

"The purpose of art is to relieve us of this isolation in the realm of the beautiful, and to facilitate the fixation of our attention. Everything in nature which we wish to isolate from an object or an association of various objects, whether temporally or spatially—this, art actually isolates; and it presents, to us, this object or association of various objects as clearly and as consistently as the sensa-

[4] Compare this with the eighty-third paragraph of Leibniz's *Monadology*: "rational minds are images of the creator himself, the divine author of nature. Rational minds are capable of knowing the system of the universe and to some extent imitating it by architectonic patterns. Every rational mind is as it were a little divinity in its own department." Translation by Carr.

tion, which these objects are supposed to arouse, will permit."

In this passage, Lessing's consideration is obviously metaphysical rather than aesthetic. He lifts art from the hands of nature only to drop it into the lap of thought; in his sight, it should be the handmaiden of philosophy. It is our "attention" which should be fixed (there is not a mention of imagination or emotion); and the "sensation," which is aroused, is stimulated not by art but by a supposed awareness of the "objects" themselves. *Die Bestimmung der Kunst ist, uns . . . dieser Absonderung zu überheben!* Art ceases to be a power and persuasion in its own right; and the artist becomes a surrogate for the logician. It does, we may well protest, small justice to the completeness of the aesthetic experience and to the constructive ability of the artist to represent the latter as isolating a section or fragment, however clear, of the whole. In an essentially opposite manner, the artist works (not, to be sure, in metaphysical but in aesthetic terms) from the fragmentary to the whole, from the particular to the universal; and his high aim is not isolation but integration.

"As virtue was, for Socrates, a matter of knowledge; so poetry was, for Lessing, a matter of

knowledge." [5] This does not imply that Lessing is not concerned with the passions and emotions of poetry. He has, in fact, a great deal to say about them, especially in drama; but when he has (as, notably, in the case of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), he is generally concerned with the passions and emotions which are "imitated" or "represented," not—and the distinction is essential—with those which are immediately stirred by the sensuous, imaginative quality of poetry itself. Pity and fear, the two emotions which, in the wake of Aristotle, he discussed and analyzed *ad nauseam*, are not primary aesthetic reactions at all; and Lessing was interested in them less for their poetic qualities, as we have noted, than for their ethical implications.

The type of poetry which is the most immediate expression of emotion was the least attractive to Lessing. When we recall what the older German lyrics, particularly the *Volkslieder*, meant to Herder, Goethe, and the Romanticists, it is with surprise that we read in one of Lessing's letters: "As for songs, I have found, among our older poets, little or nothing which would be worth preserving. . . . To do honor to the poetic genius of our ancestors,

[5] Gundolf, *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* (Berlin, 1927), p. 136. Nietzsche has, analogously, written of Euripides: "sein ästhetischer Grundsatz 'alles muss bewusst sein, um schön zu sein' ist, wie ich sagte, der Parallelsatz zu dem sokratischen 'alles muss bewusst sein, um gut zu sein!'" *Werke* (Leipzig, 1895), I, 92.

we should have to select from the narrative and didactic (*dogmatische*), rather than the lyric type." [6] It was the meaning or message of poetry which Lessing stressed. Whereas Grillparzer properly felt that poetry was "a sort of *Unsinn*," Lessing was especially drawn to the *Sinngedicht*, helping edit the epigrams of Logau; unduly exalted the fable; and built the key-scene of *Nathan der Weise* about a didactic parable.

Lessing tended to identify creative capacity with sheer theoretic insight. In a scene of *Emilia Galotti*, which reads like a dramatic commentary to *Laokoon*, he has Conti, the artist, surmise that Raphael "would have been the greatest genius among painters" even "if he had, unfortunately, been born without hands." [7] It is patently Lessing himself, rather than a practising painter, who is expressing this opinion. For this is a denial of the very being of an artist. No amount of judicious observation and contemplation will suffice, and no amount of acquaintance with thought or feeling; all that can ultimately make an artist is active familiarity with his medium. That is the *only* source of insight and power which an artist has, and which is denied to all others. To maintain that Raphael would have been a great painter without arms is

[6] To Herder, Jan. 10, 1779.

[7] Act I, scene 4.

like insisting that Shakespeare would have been a great poet without ever having used speech.[8]

If the painter "sees" things with altogether different eyes from the ordinary person's, it is because he sees through the progressive practice of his art. It is not the eye of the painter or the sculptor which dictates to his hands; rather it is his hands which guide and educate his eye. For it is his hands which have immediate and vital contact with his medium; and it is from this contact that the truly fashioning impulse comes. Amputate a sculptor's hands, and you will gradually blind him.

Exploration into the provinces of reality is the profession of the scientist; exploration into the provinces of the mind is the profession of the philosopher; the profession of the artist is exploration into the resources of his medium. The inadequate artist is one who tries to put something into his art; the adequate artist is the one who knows how to get something out of it.

An artist's immature stimulus comes from reality; his mature impulse comes from his medium. As his eye is trained by his hand, so his mind is patterned by his sense of form. "For the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form,

[8] Again, Grillparzer supplies a wholesome corrective to Lessing's attitude, as well as the tradition which it encouraged. "Die Deutschen meinen, es sei überall mit einem 'Wissen' gethan. Die Kunst beruht aber auf einem 'Können.'" *Tagebücher* (Sauer's edition), I, 89.

but from form to thought and passion." [9] There is no short-cut to artistic achievement, not even an intellectual one.

Still less an emotional one! In words which are highly reminiscent of Conti's, Werther exclaims: "at present, I could not draw, not even a single line; and yet I was never a greater painter than at this moment." [10] But poor Werther, as the mature Goethe would have been the first to remind us, was suffering from one of the commonest romantic delusions. His is a conception, not of the artist, but merely of the dilettante. Goethe himself, in an early letter, provides the succinct corrective to his hero's aberration: "An artist is nothing so long as his hands do not work and shape." [11]

In the heat of controversy, Lessing actually attributed his own competence as a dramatist to critical intelligence alone. Referring to his plays, he avowed: "Whatever is tolerable in the recent ones, I am very aware in my own mind that I owe it, solely and only (*einzig und allein*), to criticism." [12] And he was further moved to ascribe his own lesser creative virtues to the greater virtues of others. "The years of our youth are not the years from which we should expect tragic masterpieces. . . .

[9] Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works* (New York, 1927), V, 219.
[10] Book one, letter of May 10th.
[11] Letter to Herder, presumably, beginning of July, 1772.
[12] *LM.*, X, 209.

Let no one begin to work until he is, for the greater part, sure of his matter. And when can he be thus sure? When he has studied nature, and when he has studied the ancients sufficiently. But these are long years of apprenticeship! Let it suffice that the years of mastership will, in compensation, last all the longer. Sophocles wrote tragedies until he was in his eighties." [13]

The very example that Lessing cites is not a happy one. Sophocles, as Lessing himself informs us in his fragmentary biography, was already known to the public as a dramatist when he was twenty-five, or younger. Presumably he *began* to write tragedies considerably earlier. It is all too true that masterpieces are to be expected of an artist only in his maturity. But what is the artist to do about it in the meantime? Lessing's recommendation hardly provides a promising answer. The man who never starts to work until he is ready to create a masterpiece, will never create anything. Yet Lessing would have the artist wait until he had become "sure of his matter" by sufficiently studying "nature" and the "ancients." This, the old pseudo-classic *cliché*, sounds considerably more like Opitz and Gottsched than anything we should expect from Lessing. An adequate study of nature will, of itself, never make a poet. At the most, it

[13] *Ibid.*, VIII, 216.

will make a scientist. And diligently studying the ancients will, of itself, never turn out an artist. At the most, it will turn out a classical scholar, or an archaeologist.

In *Laokoon*, Lessing differentiates the formative arts from poetry on the basis of three considerations: objects (bodies vs. actions), means (figures and colors vs. sounds), and conditions or settings (space vs. time). All three of these considerations are, however, subordinated to Aristotle's fundamentally philosophic rather than aesthetic principle of "imitation" or "representation." On the whole, Lessing's *Laokoon* is, in fact, more dependent upon Aristotle than his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. In the *Dramaturgie*, Lessing spectacularly arrives at the *Poetics* (categorically asserting an allegiance which, to be sure, had not altogether been ignored earlier in the work); in *Laokoon*, he quietly departs from it. In the *Dramaturgie*, moreover, he is essentially concerned only with the end of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. In *Laokoon*, he is concerned with Aristotle's comprehensive definition of all the arts.

V

"REPRESENTATION" AS AN AESTHETIC NORM

Art may be *described* in many ways; it can be *defined* only in one way. It may be described realistically, historically, psychologically, and so on interminably. The only way it can be defined is aesthetically.

Likewise, art may be *oriented* in many ways; it can be *evaluated* only in one way. It may be oriented philosophically, scientifically, sociologically, and so on indefinitely. The only way it can be evaluated is aesthetically.

The basis of art is not "imitation" or "representation," as the pseudo-classicists would see it. Nor is it "creation" or "expression," as the romanticists, in their revolt, would have it. The basis of art is *composition.*

It is composition, and composition alone, which distinguishes all art from all that is not art. And it is composition, and composition alone, which distinguishes superior from inferior art.

Composition is the basis of all art; and it is the secret of the greatest, which is classic art.

Art must be defined and evaluated in its own context. We realize the transcendent genius of Shakespeare by comparing him, not with reality, but with other dramatists. We discover the incomparable mastery of Beethoven by comparing him, not with nature, but with other composers. And we recognize the significance of Rembrandt's portraits by comparing them, not with their Dutch sitters, but with other paintings.

The doctrine of imitation (*mimesis*), or representation, as it should more fittingly be called, owes, of course, its great authority to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the fountain-head of all European criticism. But, it should be definitely recognized, the *Poetics* is, strictly, not an aesthetic treatise; and the author's essential interests are not artistic. Aristotle's primary aim was, not to define art in itself, but to orient it, scientifically and philosophically, in the general scheme of human affairs.

Mimesis singularly failed to account for the possibilities of two major arts—architecture and music. Architecture, inasmuch as it obviously lacked "imitative" qualities, was not considered by Aristotle a fine art at all. And music, which he considered the most imitative of all arts—"in rhythms and melodies we have the most realistic imitations of anger and mildness as well as of

courage, temperance and all their opposites" [1]—was, in his sight and in that of his fellow countrymen, not an independent art, but only an accompaniment and accessory of poetry. To describe music as a mere imitation of emotional conditions is to reduce it—and this was apparently its status among the Greeks—to little more than tonal mimicry.

Representation as a norm inevitably leads to endless contentions about "nature," the commonest and most abused term in all criticism. As an aesthetic term, nature may mean everything and nothing. Interchangeably and indiscriminately, it has been used as an excuse for the most indolent conservatism and a pretence for the most erratic reform. There is scarcely an atrocity in the long history of art and poetry that has not been committed in its name.

Hardly less hallowed in criticism than "nature" is the term "truth." For, again, Aristotle had written that, in drama, "character must be true to life." [2] What, indeed, constitutes "truth to life"? In the worst sense, it implies that the artist is merely reproducing qualities which exist in reality. In a finer sense, it implies that, by certain

[1] Cf. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London, 1927), p. 129.

[2] *Poetics*, ch. 15.

aesthetic means, he is giving us the same *impression* as the real thing gives—the painter who has done a landscape has not merely copied it but has, by methods of his own, created the same effect as the landscape would make upon us. But, even in this second sense, justice has by no means been done to art. If its purpose were only to reproduce the same impressions which we get from nature itself, then art would be quite superfluous.

The essential consideration—if the word representation must be used—is, not the quality of the thing represented, but the quality of the representation. Poetry, if it is to conform to any sort of nature, must conform, not to the nature of things, but to the nature of *poetry*. And art, if it is to be true to anything, must be true to itself. "The justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is. . . . Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style." [3]

There are, in short, two essential objections to representation as an aesthetic norm. It tends, in the first place, to put the center of interest and the standard of judgment outside the work of art. And, in so doing, it tends to ignore or slight those very qualities which are the most immediate and distinctive manifestations of art.

[3] Oscar Wilde, *op. cit.*, V, 19, 35.

The impressions we receive from a novel of Tolstoy, a statue of Michel Angelo, or a symphony of Sibelius are altogether different from any sensations which actual experience can ever vouchsafe us. Those who maintain that art is fundamentally representative are inevitably faced by a major dilemma, which permits of no consistent solution. Why, indeed, should a composer be most fitted to "represent" sadness when he is in his happiest musical mood? And why should tragedy, which "represents" extreme suffering and distress, afford us the highest dramatic delight?

To place the standard of judgment outside the work of art, encourages the confusion lamented by Whistler in his *Ten O'Clock*. "A curious matter, in its effect upon the judgment of these gentlemen, is the accepted vocabulary, of poetic symbolism, that helps them, by habit, in dealing with Nature: a mountain, to them, is synonymous with height—a lake, with depth—the ocean, with vastness—the sun, with glory.

"So that a picture with a mountain, a lake, and an ocean—however poor in paint—is inevitably 'lofty,' 'vast,' 'infinite,' and 'glorious'—on paper."

It was the reverse of this conclusion, based, however, on the same fundamental confusion, that prompted Lessing to reject landscape painting. Since he saw no virtue in mere landscape, he could

find no virtue in the treatment of it.[4] That art itself might endow nature with an ideal seems not to have occurred to Lessing. Yet this is obviously so. "What to other men is nothing more than woods and countryside appears to the great painter as the countenance of a vast being. Corot saw kindliness hovering over the crest of the trees, over the grass of the plains, and over the mirror of lakes. In these same things, Millet saw suffering and resignation. Everywhere a great artist detects a spirit corresponding to his own spirit." [5]

It is not an ideal which is derived from reality; it is the ideal which resides in his art that occupies and fascinates the artist. All that is significant and enduring *in* art must be significant and enduring *as* art. The rest is alien, and deserves to perish. Rodin's definition of the "ugly" is a perfect example of precise aesthetic differentiation. "What is ugly in art is . . . all that which is only a parade of beauty and grace." [6] According to this proper definition, *beauty* itself is *ugly* in art if it is not artistically established and justified. Nor, if it is not thus justified, can it ever be "true." This, of course, is the principle implied in Goethe's classic

[4] "Da jede nachahmende Kunst vornehmlich durch die eigene Trefflichkeit des nachgeahmten Gegenstandes gefallen und rühren soll. . . ." Blümner, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

[5] Rodin, *L'Art* (Paris, 1924), p. 238.

[6] *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

distinction between *Kunstwahrheit* and *Naturwirklichkeit.* With such a distinction in mind, Goethe, in contrast to Lessing, could observe: "it was not so much the ugly as the false that the ancients shunned." [7]

But, it will be protested, significance and greatness in real life must, in some pertinent way, be commensurate with significance and greatness in art or literature. Considerably less than is commonly supposed! Dürer's drawing of a rabbit is justly more famous than thousands of portraits of eminent and handsome nobles; Goethe's attraction to the daughter of a simple Alsatian pastor could evolve into one of the loveliest and most luminous portraits in all drama; and the imperial eagle of Rome was never so gloriously immortalized in the whole range of Latin poetry as the tiny sparrow of Lesbia was immortalized in a few verses of Catullus. The house of the poet's imagination is not inhabited; it is haunted. And what strange, insubstantial spectre will fill, to its uttermost reaches, the domain of his familiar, substantial vision, no one shall vouch. The poet does not clothe a body; he embodies a wraith.

> Was unsterblich im Gesang soll leben,
> Muss im Leben untergehn.

[7] Cf. Howard, *op. cit.*, p. CLIX.

VI

THE "OBJECTS" OF REPRESENTATION

The uncertainty of representation as a norm is specifically illustrated by a double argument in *Laokoon*. Because the symbols of poetry are successive, Lessing insists that poetry can effectively "imitate" only things which are successive. Again, because the symbols of the formative arts are co-existent, he insists that the artist cannot effectively "imitate" the "transitory." Such arguments would be altogether valid only if art and poetry were supposed to give an exact duplicate or a slavish reproduction of reality. It is, however, quite apparent that both artists and poets have considerably more latitude than Lessing's principles grant. One of the standard criticisms against *Laokoon* will always be that the author of the later chapters is intent on clipping the wings of imagination with the sharp, bright shears of reason.

The confusion of "real" and "aesthetic" qualities, carried to an extreme, would justify the instructions for portrait-painting given by an old English writer. "Let the king have the first place, in a good light, and next his retinue or other proper persons. Then if there be yet other persons of

lesser importance to be included, put them in the shade, and the less important they are, the deeper the shade." Lessing, to be sure, never went to this absurd extreme; but on grounds, not altogether without analogy, he summarily excluded inferior "objects" from the canvas of the "ideal" artist. It is possible that Bosanquet had Lessing personally in mind when he wrote: "It has been thought that you must come to higher aesthetic quality as you go up the scale of creation, because in that way you come to higher structures. But the fact is that in a sense these higher structures, e.g., of animals, limit your imagination. They do not merge in a new context so readily as do the sea or the clouds, which can take on innumerable variations of appearance. And it is the task of aesthetic perception—perception when it passes into imagination—to choose or create the object, the appearance, whose form or soul or life will satisfy feeling." [1]

How can we really get *behind* what the artist has expressed? And why should we so desperately try to? In our contemplation and appreciation of art, it is hardly profitable to proceed from the known to the unknown, the immediate to the remote, the concrete to the problematic. It is quite easy to

[1] *Three Lectures on Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1931), p. 18. In this connection see Bosanquet's remarks on Lessing in his *History of Aesthetic* (London, 1922), p. 229.

assert that art represents something. But, when it is asked *what* it represents, the assertion is not so simple. If the artist's painting of a tree represented only *tree* qualities, his work would be only of botanical significance. And if his treatment of a wheat field did no more than reproduce or enhance the nature of the field, his art would be of interest only to farmers and grain merchants.

With regard to the Venus of Milo, we may say: it represents a Greek goddess. But how are we to judge the quality of the representation if we are unfamiliar with this goddess?

Or, we may say: it represents a beautiful woman. But how, again, are we to judge the virtue of the representation if we do not know the woman in question?

Or, we may say: it represents woman as such. But woman as such is only a fabrication of theoretic reason, and never inspired the imagination of an artist.

Or, finally, we may say: it represents beauty as such. But beauty as such, like woman as such, exists only in the mind of speculative philosophers. Art would have died long since, if it were born of speculation; and beauty would have starved as soon, if it fed only on abstractions.

The Venus of Milo represents nothing "in reality," and nothing "as such." If anything, it

represents, concretely and vividly, a woman *in marble.*

What, then—to be general—does the artist represent? Apropos of a subject, he concretely and vividly represents certain virtues which are inherent in his medium, thoroughly becoming to his medium, and utterly indefinable apart from his medium. An artist may, with impunity, depart miles from the realm of reality; he may depart leagues from the straight and narrow path of reason; but he is not privileged to depart a single step from the inexorable bounds of his medium. It should be self-evident: no more can be expressed by art than that which it contains.

Now, the fact that representation is not adequate as an aesthetic norm and, used as a norm, inevitably leads to all sorts of confusions and dilemmas, does not mean that it has no place in art and that it should be stricken from the aesthetic vocabulary. No term which has played such an important part in the history of art can be altogether disregarded. Representation not only has a certain function in art; in some arts it has a very important one. We can, in fact, as has often been done, establish a hierarchy of the arts according to this function. At the bottom would come architecture, as the least or not at all representational; then music, then poetry, then painting; and finally, as the most

representational, sculpture. But such an arrangement has little significance, for this representational hierarchy is far from being an aesthetic one. The presence of greater or lesser representational quality does not indicate the prevalence of greater or lesser artistic qualities: sculpture is by no means a "higher" form of art than music because it is more imitative.

Also, because art cannot be defined as a *representation* of life, it does not follow that it has no *reference* to life.[2] Art has constant reference to life (it is, in the largest sense, always an expression of life); and, in some cases, this reference may practically amount to representation. It is by no means mere chance or a condemnation of artistic invention that sculptors have persistently taken the human body as a subject. A sculptor, moreover, is hardly expected to represent this body with the legs in place of the arms, or with two heads and only one foot. But the fact that an artist cannot flagrantly affront our sense of reality does not imply that he must slavishly conform to it.

To what degree may an artist ignore or violate

[2] The whole quarrel about "art for art's sake" largely derives from the failure to make two important differentiations: the differentiation between art as being a *representation* of life and art as having *reference* to life; and the differentiation between art as a *detached* manifestation and art as a *distinctive* manifestation. Art is neither of the first; but it is both of the latter.

our sense of reality? It all depends—and to this point we must constantly return—on his medium, the compositional quality of his art. "You can call a girl 'a phantom of delight' or a poplar a 'green flame,' or say that a brook 'babbles' or the wind 'shouts,' and nobody will turn a hair, but if you do similar things in painting you are likely to be called to account." [3] Although we should seriously object to two heads and only one foot in sculpture, we are perfectly satisfied and delighted to hear human beings on the stage extemporaneously talking in the most glorious blank verse. Yet the latter phenomenon is, scarcely less than the first, a gross violation of customary fitness. What conclusion are we to draw? Simply that the medium of the dramatist has much greater latitude and elasticity than that of the sculptor. Again, it does not offend our sensibilities if, in a fairy tale, a little princess sits on a flower stalk; but we should be uneasy to see her sitting there in a painting in oil. If this is the case, it is because our sense of gravity is much less operative in the reading of a fairy tale than in the contemplation of an oil-painting, or a bronze statue.

What does the painter or sculptor "see"? If we ask *how* he sees, then the first question is practically

[3] Anonymous editorial in *The London Times Literary Supplement*, June 10, 1939, p. 341.

answered. He sees *through* his medium. And that is the way he also feels and thinks, and teaches us to see and feel and think. For aesthetic vision is considerably more than mere sight; and the aesthetically sensuous is decidedly more than the sheer sensory.

These are distinctions which Lessing is prone to overlook. When he holds that the artist imitates "bodies" which are not in "action," he tends to make art physical, inert, and uninspired. After all, Aristotle, from whom Lessing departed, considered all art a representation of "men in action"; and Winckelmann platonically held that it represented an "ideal," an assumption which Lessing, at times, shared in *Laokoon* and, at other times, discarded—happily, when he indicated that the ideal which Winckelmann sought was primarily an ethical one, unhappily, when he implied that art should be a faithful transcription of a "body."

Moreover, Lessing, as it has frequently been noted, was uncertain and inconsistent in his employment of "action" (*Handlung*); and both Mendelssohn, in his correspondence, and Herder, in his *Wäldchen*, were advised in taking issue with this employment. In certain passages, Lessing practically identified "action" with "movement" (Mendelssohn insisted that "objects which succeed one another or whose parts succeed one another"

constituted, not *Handlungen*, but *Bewegungen*); in other passages, he apparently used it synonymously with the broad definition formulated in his essay on the *Fable*—"every inner struggle of passions, every sequence of various thoughts." In the latter sense, it was perilously close in meaning to the *praxis* ("an inward process, a psychical energy working outwards"),[4] which Aristotle considered the basis of all art and literature. Yet it was precisely a disregard for the essential quality of "energy" that Herder censured in Lessing's description and analysis of poetry.

It was undoubtedly Lessing's preoccupation with Homer as a standard that led him to stress unduly the significance of "action" in poetry. The *Iliad*, from which he almost exclusively drew his positive examples, is thoroughly an epic of action; and "rapidity" was one of the qualities which Matthew Arnold, for patent reasons, considered pre-eminently characteristic of the Homeric manner. But, as Herder objected, Homer cannot be made a general norm for all epic poetry, still less for all poetry, even among the Greeks. Beside Homer, the narrator, there stand Pindar, the "lyric painter," and Anacreon, "the singer."

[4] Cf. Butcher, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

VII

"CREATION" AS A NORM

The trouble with "representation" as an aesthetic norm, we have noted, is that it is too "objective." The trouble with "creation" is that it is too subjective. Representation, so closely allied with "reproduction" and "imitation," places too much emphasis on the *thing* which is expressed. Creation, so closely allied with "originality" and "genius," draws too much attention to the person and privacy of the artist. Creation undoubtedly has considerable validity as a contrast and corrective to representation; but it has little virtue as a standard in itself.

Creation, in fact, made its historic appearance as a counteraction to the traditional doctrine of imitation. As an aesthetic principle, it is a relatively recent arrival in literature and criticism, coming as late as the middle of the eighteenth century. The significant thing is that it arose, not when actual poetic creation was at a peak, but when it was at an ebb. It is the familiar story: achievement is sufficient unto itself; it is only deficiency that has to be proclaimed, and promulgated, and glorified. "Original composition" was not the de-

vice of the authors of the *Canterbury Tales*, *The Tempest*, and *Paradise Lost;* it was the slogan of the author of *Night Thoughts*. That was as late as 1759. It was in conjunction with this slogan that the cry of "creation" arose; and, in the midst of the din, Lessing, with his mind on other matters, quietly but none the less pertinently observed: "We seldom proclaim the virtue which we possess; but, all the more, the one which we lack."

The author who has genuine creative capacity is too busy practising it to profess it; and the only artist who has to insist on "originality" is the one who can't stand comparisons. "Creative," "genius," and "originality" are all "romantic" words;[1] and it is noteworthy that, perhaps, the outstanding characteristic of German romanticism, which represents European romanticism in its fullest bloom as well as its seed, is the piteous discrepancy between the pretention of theoretic announcement and the paucity of actual achievement. More genuine imagination is to be found in the simple little *Märchen, collected* by the German romanticists, than in all the voluminous prose they ever *created.* There is a halo around Romanticism only if it is set off against the dullest background, which is not other art or literature, but only Philistinism—that is, the utter negation of art and literature.

[1] Cf. Logan Pearsall Smith, *Words and Idioms* (Boston and New York, 1926), p. 93ff.

It was not until authors started writing down that they could begin to set themselves up. It was only after Diderot, an early romantic, insisted on educating the public that the later romantics could pertinently revile it: *épatez les bourgeois.* It was only after eighteenth century authors had invited the general run of "humanity" over the threshold of art and literature that the nineteenth century ones could start kicking it out of the house. Rousseau was the author who proudly declared that, if he was not better than "other men," he was at least different. Such self-satisfaction would have been out of the question in an earlier age. For no prominent author or artist, prior to the eighteenth century, ever thought of comparing himself, *in his capacity as author or artist,* with ordinary citizens at large—the butcher, the miller, the tollman, and the nightwatchman. With a proper sense of the distinction and obligation of his craft, whether painter or poet or goldsmith, he compared himself with his fellow artists. As long as such becoming comparisons prevailed, there was none of the strutting and self-glorification of the romantics. Villon, when he transgressed, did not think he had discovered a short-cut to salvation; and Günther, when he staggered in drink, did not feel he had evolved a superior form of locomotion. It was only after authors had begun to flaunt their

writings in the face of the illiterate and the indiscriminate that they revelled in their private emancipation; it was only after they had made a practice of comparing themselves with the inferior and the inept that they found especial delight in their individuality and eccentricity. Victor Hugo, in the preface of his turgidly rhetorical *Cromwell*, boasted of the innovations he was introducing; Racine, in the preface of his exquisitely poetic *Bérénice*, apologized for the liberties he was taking.

So-called romantic imagination is not impressive if compared to the vitality of great art. It is impressive only if compared to the aridity of pseudo-classicism. Rousseau confessed that his "most constant happiness was in dreams." But it is not sufficient for an author merely to have dreams. He must also be able to fashion them. Rousseau, however, did not fashion his dreams. He only recorded them. And so he remains, not a creative artist, but only a vivid and eloquent reporter. It is not an *imaginative* world that he reveals to us; it is only an *imaginary* one.

The romantics, in fact, copied no less literally than the pseudo-classicists. The latter copied others; the former copied themselves. By the same token, the romantic is hardly less naturalistic than the realist. Being the victim of one's feelings is just as bad as being the slave of circumstances.

It requires no more imagination to record the vagaries of one's own mind than it does to record the trivialities of someone else's nose. The realist tediously transcribes the things outside him; the romantic tediously transcribes the things inside him. The first, with endless detail, examines the victuals on his plate; the second, with no less endless delight, analyzes his digestion.

The distinction between *imaginative* and *imaginary* must be conceived in terms of composition. An artist may avoid the realities of life; but he cannot afford to avoid the realities of his art. Imagination, which is truly creative, overcomes the inertia and stubbornness of a medium. Imagination, which is only evasive, follows the lines of least resistance.

And so, creation is meaningless unless it is effectively allied with a medium. In itself, creation, or expression, which is frequently used as a synonym, does not, in any way, distinguish that which is art from that which is not art. Nor does it, in any way, discriminate between good art and bad art. A monstrosity is just as much a creation as a thing of beauty; and self-expression may lead to abominable just as often as it leads to splendid poetry. A common belch is certainly expressive; and mighty expressive, at that. But it is far from being art.

To be art a thing must be articulated. Aesthetic creation can be justified only in terms of communication; and aesthetic communication can be defined only in terms of composition. Imagination which buzzes in the mind of the artist or hovers aimlessly over, around, and beside his work, is of no consequence whatsoever. All that is aesthetically pertinent is the imagination that enters his medium, lives and is contained there, suffuses and sustains it. As such, it is articulate; and aesthetic articulation is the most vivid, impressive, and enduring form of human utterance. If we must fix the status of the artist, we can hardly do better than to describe him as the most articulate of men.

Great art is born of recollection, traditional as well as individual. There is no such thing as spontaneous generation in the artistic or spiritual realm any more than there is in the physical. What the true artist strives for is, not sudden self-expression, but the gradual and enlightened discovery of his birthright. It is only second-rate artists who spend their time and energy scandalizing their contemporaries; first-rate ones spend theirs affirming their allegiance to their predecessors. A true artist comes of noble stock; and he is proud of his forbears.

An artist must have a strong sense of identity; but he must also be able to submerge this sense of

self in the fuller consciousness of his medium. We may say that Monet and Cézanne lived *to* themselves, but not that they lived *for* themselves. For artists who live for themselves are not content to live alone. They are always before the public, and they constantly have the public in mind. It is reputation and acclaim they are thinking of; and it is the most personal of desires they wish to have publically substantiated. Wagner and Whistler were a curious combination. When they were alone, they were intently thinking of their art. When they were with others, they were incessantly thinking of themselves.

Monet and Cézanne were constantly alone, and they were constantly living for their art. When Monet sat before the Rouen cathedral throughout the day, actively studying it at all hours, it was not the light reflected from a mere edifice he was trying to catch: it was the light which filtered down to him through long generations of painting. And, when Cézanne stood on the edge of a field in Southern France, agonized to fix the vision that tantalizingly haunted his mind yet treacherously threatened to elude it, it was not an aberrant dream of his own provocation he finally succeeded in "realizing"; it was his legitimate heritage from Rembrandt and Rubens.

VIII

COMPOSITION

In art, it is inept to distinguish between "form" and "content," *Gestalt* and *Gehalt*. Such a distinction would have us believe that the content or meaning is some inner substance while the form or style is some sort of shell or cover which is arbitrarily imposed upon it. This, however, is clearly not the case. Whatever is form in art is every bit as deep as that which is content; and whatever has meaning in art can have meaning only as form.

It is often said that such-and-such an author "writes well or beautifully," but that he is "not profound or impressive." Yet such an author is not writing well or beautifully at all. He is writing superficially—just the way he is thinking and feeling. He may be writing well in a purely *literal* manner; and that is sufficient to meet the requirements of an academic course in "Composition." But it is by no means sufficient to fulfil the exigencies of art. There is all the difference in the world between the mere linguistic properties and the aesthetic values of speech. To be a "lord of language" may mean no more than to be an accomplished rhetorician. To be a poet, an author

must be a lord of *poetic* language; and such language probes to the very depths of human sentiment, human suffering, and human imagination.

It is inevitably the artist's medium that indicates the area he has encompassed. If a man carves a human head in marble, he is surely expressing more than one who carves it on a cherry stone. If this is the case, it is because marble expresses more than a cherry stone, not, necessarily, because the one man may, or may not, have had more to say than the other. How, in truth, can we tell what a man has to say? All we can judge is the way he *does* say it.

Likewise, the sculptor who carves a human body in marble is surely expressing more than the one who carves a toad in marble. Again, it is because the first *composition* expresses more than the second. It is the aesthetic fitness of the imaginative experience to a medium that is the determinant. A still life, which is altogether unfit for expression in stone, may yet be very worthy of treatment in oil.

It may be maintained that Offenbach, for his purposes, was just as much a master of music as Beethoven; and that Addison, in his way, was just as much a master of language as Milton was in his. But these qualifications, "for his purposes" and "in his way," at once reveal that the implied inter-

pretation of music and language is inadequate. An artist who, like Offenbach and Addison, is occupied only with the lighter and pleasantly engaging qualities of expression is far from being a master of his medium. He is only an accomplished manipulator of its upper levels. To be a true master, as Milton was, and Beethoven, implies the ability to sound the greatest depths of a medium, to explore its fullest resources, and to control its furtherest as well as its nearest range.

Insight into medium and insight into reality by no means go hand in hand. Rodin is hardly to be reckoned among the world's great thinkers; and he made no contribution to philosophy. But he transcendently represented Thought as a sculptor; and he has given the world its most impressive conception of the Philosopher in stone. Albrecht Dürer is scarcely to be included among the great theologians. Yet he has given us a vision of the Apostles as vivid and haunting as any to be found in the long annals of the Church Fathers. There are those who would discover in Shakespeare's dramas the speculation of the philosopher, the science of the chemist and physician, and the technical training of a lawyer. They forget the tremendous magnification of Shakespeare's fancy, and overlook the dazzling range and projection of his poetic diction. One legal phrase in Shakespeare's

language is more memorable than a whole tome of briefs; in his speculative soliloquies, a single simile rings out more vibrantly than a full battery of syllogisms; and a tiny vial, in the radiance of his imagination, is a more lustrous display than the whole variety of an apothecary's shelf. Beethoven's was clearly not a happy life, even judged by common standards. Yet, in the finale of his Ninth Symphony, he has Joy exult as it rings forth in no other music. Instead of being a representation of nature, great art is frequently man's most "gallant protest" against it. Far from being the dutiful acceptance of his natural, it is the proud proclamation of his unnatural rights—his indomitable humanity.

An aesthetic medium is considerably more than mere material; and aesthetic experience is incomparably more than mere observation. Unfortunately, these distinctions have been frequently ignored. There has, recently, been a decided tendency to "abstract" the medium of art, particularly in painting and music, and to identify *aesthetic qualities* with sheer *physical properties*. This is a natural reaction of the disciples of art for art's sake against those who would associate, with art, all sorts of things—values, meanings, and instructions—which are foreign or only incidental to it. But the struggle for "pure form" has led to

mannerisms as rigid as those of the academic school; and the trend toward abstractness has fostered an aridity hardly less brittle than that of pseudo-classicism. Because painting should have no literary meaning, is no reason why it should not have aesthetic meaning. Because music should not be sentimental, is no reason why it should not have emotional qualities. Because poetry has no social message, it does not follow that it should be stripped of human interest. The artist may snub society; but he cannot, with impunity, turn his back on humanity. It is participation, and not mere perception, which should inspire and sustain him.

An artist is not exploring the true resources of his medium when he plays about with curves, planes, cylinders, and other mathematical contrivances. To paint or mould a human head cubically is not to paint or mould it aesthetically; it is merely to substitute geometric for anatomic qualities.

The search for pure "formal qualities" and sheer "line and color" has failed to recognize the essential difference between aesthetic *medium* and mere material. Sheer material is, aesthetically, just as crude as sheer reality; and it is just as possible to give a merely literal treatment of the medium as it is of its object. There is a vast difference between aesthetic stone values and the mere physical properties of stone. If the painting of a wheat field

simply brought out the "nature" of the field, it would, we have noted, be of interest only to farmers or grain merchants. If, on the other hand, a cathedral or a statue simply brought out the "nature" of stone, it would be of interest only to geologists.

When we speak of the marble qualities or values in a statue, we have considerably more in mind than mere stone properties. An analogous distinction applies to all art. "Just because a dancer uses her body as a medium of her art, that does not mean that her dancing is confined to her physical existence." [1] And, if a painting excites feeling, it is because it "expresses" this feeling. Were the "oil" values in a painting essentially physical, then the work of the painter would not be a revelation of art but rather a brilliant advertisement for a petroleum company. It has properly been observed that we are more than mere eye when we look at a canvas and that we are more than mere ear when we listen to music. On the face of it, "abstraction" is an aesthetic absurdity, for concreteness and sensuousness are the very substance of art. The pursuit of "pure form" has never been a profitable one. "History shows that hazardous to art as the didactic spirit is, the mood of great masters in great art-periods is nearer to the didactic

[1] Howard Hannay, *Roger Fry and Other Essays* (London, 1937), p. 50.

spirit than to the conscious quest for abstract beauty." [2]

The objections to a painting which essentially gives us a photographic representation of reality and the objections to one which essentially gives us a physical representation of line and color are precisely the same: both works are too physiological. The first artist is too physiological in the contemplation of his object; the second is too physiological in the manipulation of his medium. One gives us a literal transcription of physical qualities *outside* his canvas; the other, of physical qualities *upon* his canvas. The former provides a "raw slice" of life; the latter, a "raw slice" of art. Each is lacking in aesthetic sensibility and maturity.

The conclusion should be obvious. Crass naturalism is just as possible in the treatment of "art" as it is in the treatment of "reality," or of inner "sentiments" and "emotions." And in none of these cases does it have aesthetic justification.

[2] Bosanquet, *History of Aesthetic*, p. 227.

IX

SYMBOLS: "NATURAL" AND "ARBITRARY"

Naturalism, in the full sense, is one of the pitfalls which the argument of *Laokoon* fails to avoid. By considering art an "imitation" of reality, by stressing sensory perception rather than aesthetic participation, by defining the "symbols" of poetry as "articulated sounds in time" and the symbols of painting as "figures and colors in space," and then trying to establish a rather constant "convenience" between the mere *properties* of these symbols and the properties of the object imitated—in short, by making painting and sculpture a sort of reproduction and poetry a sort of transcription of life, Lessing tends to emphasize altogether too strongly the merely literal aspects of art. Beginning with chapter sixteen, he is largely interested, on the one hand, in physical and, on the other, in physiological, rather than aesthetic considerations. Painting, through these implications, almost becomes photography; and poetry practically becomes a "soundtrack," which efficiently accompanies a running action.

The literal interpretation of art could hardly be more definitely expressed than in one of the notes drafted by Lessing in the preparation of *Laokoon*. He wrote:

"Imitative symbols, which are co-existent, can express only objects which are co-existent or the parts of which are co-existent.

"Imitative symbols, which are successive, can express only objects which are successive or the parts of which are successive." [1]

To these formulations, Mendelssohn strenuously objected. He insisted that the symbols of painting should be qualified as "natural"; to Lessing's second proposition, he categorically wrote "no," and he added: "They [the symbols] can also express things which are co-existent, if they have arbitrary significance."

Herder further objected that the specification, "articulated sounds in time," failed to make any distinction between the symbols of poetry and those of ordinary prose. This objection was partially anticipated by Lessing when he wrote: "The poet does not want to be merely comprehensible. His representations are not supposed to be only clear and distinct; herewith, the prose author is satisfied." This is one of the most promising sentences in Lessing's discourse. But, unfortunately, he

[1] Blümner, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

follows it with one of the least promising. Still referring to the poet, Lessing continued: "On the contrary, he wants to arouse *ideas* in us so vividly and so *rapidly* that we believe we are receiving *true* sensuous impressions of their objects; and, in this moment of illusion (*Täuschung*), we cease to be *conscious of* the means he employs, that is, of his *words*." [2]

With this argument, Lessing harshly strips poetry of its most impressive and appealing qualities. Although he has just announced that the poet does not intend to make things "clear and distinct," he still operates with "ideas." These, having been aroused, evoke, in turn, the *true* impression of things. And, all the time, we are supposed to lose consciousness of the poet's speech, and are supposed to be deluded into believing we are face to face with ordinary reality. But how, we may ask, are we to be delighted by art if we cease to be aware of it? And where, precisely, is the charm and fascination of poetry to be found, if not in our immediate and inevitable consciousness of it? Attending a play of Racine's and ceasing to be aware of his words would be perilously like listening to a concerto of Mozart's and ceasing to be interested in the sounds. What revelation

[2] Ch. XVII. Italics are inserted.

should we seek in art if not the revelation of art itself?

> This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
> Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
> Unto our gentle senses.

What, in this passage, recommends itself unto our gentle senses, unless it be the sweetness and nimbleness of the words themselves? And who would ever want or ever be able to ignore such poetic "means" as these?

> Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
> Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows
> That liquefaction of her clothes!

There is left no image worthy of the name, once we have lost the sheer imagery of the words. And what, perchance, what "idea" or what "impression" of a real thing is evoked by such a vision?

> The light that never was, on sea or land;
> The consecration, and the Poet's dream.

In his notes to *Laokoon* and in his correspondence with Mendelssohn and Nicolai, Lessing, following the former's lead, repeatedly played on the qualification "natural" as opposed to "arbitrary" or "conventional" (*willkürliche*) symbols. The distinctions are uncertain; and the wearisome discussion, vaguely academic, leaves the reader cold and unconvinced. In a letter to Nicolai, Lessing was

capable of concluding: "Poetry must, as best it may, strive to elevate its arbitrary symbols to natural ones . . . and the highest type of poetry is the type which makes its arbitrary symbols completely natural. This is, in fact, dramatic poetry, for, in this type, the words cease to be arbitrary symbols and become natural symbols for arbitrary things." [3]

What Lessing is trying to establish by this involved and awkward argument, it is hard to say. To try to set up a sheer aesthetic scale of types, and to make drama, as such, superior to all other poetry, is as otiose as it is offensive. Moreover, such a conclusion disparages most of the clinching examples in *Laokoon*, which were drawn, not from drama, but almost exclusively from the epic poetry of Homer. In this discussion, as in various others, we vainly look for the key-word. With infinite circumspection, Lessing charts his course from "natural" shoals to "arbitrary" reefs, while the whole "imaginative" ocean of poetry lies on all sides of him.

What the artist immediately represents is, not a thing outside him, but an aesthetic impression or experience. The picture which a painter immediately *sees*, the melody which a composer immediately *hears*, and the emotion which a poet im-

[3] May 26, 1769.

mediately *feels*—all these are seen and heard and felt in the mind of the artist. And whatever symbols are fit to express this impression or experience are, artistically, perfectly natural ones. *All* the symbols of a particular art, as distinguished from all those of another, cannot with aesthetic pertinence, be labelled arbitrary or the reverse.

Instead of trying to differentiate aesthetic symbols as natural or arbitrary and conventional, we should probably do better by defining the aesthetic experience as more or less subjective, or objective. Accordingly, sculpture and painting would be the most objective arts, having the most definite *reference* to outside reality and our direct observation of that reality. Music would be the most subjective, having the most definite reference to our inner world and our immediate reactions to this world. And poetry, coming between the two groups, would, to a certain degree, share the objectivity of the first and the subjectivity of the second. The poet cannot be as specifically visual as the painter or sculptor, nor as precisely auditory as the composer. But he has a far greater and more varied range of impressions at his disposal. Above all, he can express much more complex and intricate experiences, particularly those in the finely differentiated realm of thought. Poetry, or literature, is by far the richest and most versatile of the arts.

For it ties up with all our senses and with all phases of our reaction to life.

According to Lessing, poetry is the only art which has arbitrary, or conventional, symbols. But Lessing is apparently confusing philological and aesthetic values. It is altogether true that language is arbitrarily established. But, once it *has* been established, has for generations been employed as a means of communication, and has, all this time, been associated with experience and consciousness, there is nothing arbitrary in the use of its symbols. To be sure, it is utterly arbitrary that the French should have *started* to say "chien"; the Germans, "Hund"; and the English, "dog." But, once this *linguistic* arbitrariness is accepted and practised, the aesthetic use of the word is perfectly natural; and the reactions to it are no less natural or normal. The fact that "chien" is linguistically arbitrary to an Englishman does not imply that it is aesthetically arbitrary to a Frenchman, who, after all, is the only one who is supposed to be poetically concerned. All art is unnatural if you are not trained and qualified to understand its idiom. Bach is just as strange to a man who hears improperly as Racine is to a man who comprehends French imperfectly.

The use of the term "natural," as applied to aesthetic symbols, is vicious inasmuch as it prompts

us to believe that the artist is slavishly reproducing, or merely copying. It is the elements of photography, rather than those of painting, that are natural. It will readily be granted that the lines and colors of a marine painting have extension in space just like the lines and colors of the scene that is represented; and so far there is a natural relationship between object and representation. But the artist, unlike the photographer, wants to give incomparably more than a facsimile. He also wants to give an impression. And what is more arbitrary than giving the impression of the ocean with its wetness, its tons of weight, and its incessant movement, in colors and fine lines which will inevitably dry, have no appreciable weight, and are capable of no movement whatsoever? And what devilish conventionality it requires to represent miles of transparent sunlight with a few daubs of opaque pigment!

The fact that music gives a more *immediate* impression of feeling than poetry, does not imply that musical composition is more *natural*. A shriek is a natural expression of horror, and a sneeze is a natural expression of a chill; but neither of them begins to constitute music. Music, probably more than any other art, expresses moods. And what could be more conventional than expressing unheard moods in sound? Or what could be more

arbitrary than "representing" both joy and sorrow by an arrangement of the *selfsame* notes of the scale?

This last illustration should indicate the most pertinent consideration. It is only in the context of *composition* that the aesthetic quality of symbols can be properly determined. In themselves, individual symbols have no aesthetic value and no aesthetic status worthy of the name.

"The light that never was, on sea or land!" What poetic significance is there to be attached to any of these words taken as an individual symbol? By itself, every one of them might be used by a five-year old child. It is their arrangement in phrases that matters. The stones in a pile beside the road and those in the façade of a cathedral are utterly the same "symbols." But in the pile they are "natural," if you will; in the cathedral they are "arbitrary."

For generations, "good taste" banished the homely individual symbol "ass" from "high" diction. Yet all the while it was serenely shining in the radiant constellation of a master.

> O, couldst thou speak,
> That I might hear thee call great Caesar *ass*
> Unpolicied!
> *Char.* O eastern star!
> *Cleo.* Peace, peace!

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep?
Char. O, break! O, break!
Cleo. As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle,—O Antony![4]

And, later, its no less homely offspring gloriously crossed the classic Italian scene.

Kennst du den Berg und seinen Wolkensteg?
Das *Maultier* sucht im Nebel seinen Weg;
In Höhlen wohnt der Drachen alte Brut;
Es stürzt der Fels und über ihn die Flut,
Kennst du ihn wohl?
Dahin! Dahin
Geht unser Weg, o Vater, lass uns ziehn!

And so we may safely conclude. Everything in art is arbitrary or conventional; and everything is natural. It is arbitrary or conventional if compared with reality; it is perfectly natural if we look upon it as art, a reality in itself.

[4] Cf. John Livingston Lowes, *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* (Boston and New York, 1919), p. 212.

X

TIME AND SPACE

Lessing, once he undertakes to establish his own propositions, is too set on pairing them off exactly and discovering, for every factor he places on one side of the balance, an analogous factor to go on the other. This arrangement is altogether too symmetrical: no two arts, or sets of arts, are to be so neatly and diametrically opposed.

Having decided that "painting, in its coextensive compositions, can utilize but a single moment of action," Lessing surprisingly concludes that "likewise, poetry, in its progressive imitations, can utilize *but a single characteristic of bodies*." [1] This is incredible enough; but he even goes further, and adds that the poet must choose the one characteristic "which evokes the most sensuous image of a body *from the angle which is required*." At this point Lessing has, if anything, completely reversed the situation. If any art must necessarily represent a body from a single required angle, it is definitely painting or sculpture, and not poetry. The reason for this curious reversal is, apparently, Lessing's complete hearkening to the dictates of

[1] Ch. XVI.

logical consistency. Having limited the painter to a single moment of time, he is, in search of a strict analogy, impelled to confine the poet to a single angle in space.

On practically all grounds, and specifically on grounds which Lessing himself suggests earlier in his treatise, the poet, however, has considerably more liberty than either the painter or the sculptor. Literary composition has incomparably greater range, flexibility, and suggestiveness than pictorial composition. Not only temporally but also spatially, a fact which Lessing's neat parallelisms tend to deny rather than disclose! Whereas the poet is free to come and go and to view things from all angles, all heights, and all depths, it is the painter who is obliged to contemplate his scene from a single point of view; and, unless he is primarily illustrative or symbolic, his canvas may represent no more than the eye can normally survey. As for the sculptor, he can represent no more space than his statue *actually displaces.* But the poet may jump from continent to continent, just as he leaps from one period to another. "Eight lines beginning 'A slumber did my spirit seal' may be larger in imagination than earth's diurnal course." [2]

An important distinction, which Lessing did not find occasion to stress, is that sculpture and paint-

[2] W. P. Ker, *The Art of Poetry* (Oxford, 1923), p. 25.

ing are material arts, whereas literature is not. It is evident that lines and colors, as physical qualities, are co-existential in space and that articulated sounds, likewise as physical qualities, are successive in time. But inasmuch as the sounds, being immaterial, are not so bound to the immediate senses of sight and touch, the temporal "convenience" which Lessing emphasizes between successive action and successive sound is, aesthetically, by no means as definite or fixed as the convenience between substantial co-existence in reality and the same co-existence in painting or sculpture. It by no means amounts to the *correspondence* which Lessing suggests and, at times, actually assumes. The appreciable convenience, which Lessing ascribes to all poetry, occurs only in certain *narrative* poetry, in which the language is more or less keeping pace with a running action.

In poetry the words do follow, one by one; but that is not the way they work. Poetry is scarcely to be described as a succession of effects which are discrete and which are strung along like beads on a string. The poet does not work in such straight and regular fashion. He pauses, reiterates, and modifies. His effects frequently come in cycles or clusters; they are heaped, retarded, telescoped, and fused. Far from being strictly beholden to time, he can disdain and even annihilate it. Literature

can move backward just as well as forward. Above all, it can keep coming back to the same dominant themes or impressions. A symphony of Brahms is a "succession of sounds in time" (the exact phrases which Lessing uses to formulate the symbols of poetry), and a painting of Rembrandt is a "co-existence of figures and colors." Yet, *in words*, it is much easier to give an impression or a description of the painting than of the symphony.

Lessing fails to distinguish adequately between physical and aesthetic time. It has been observed that, to a remarkable degree, "our sensations are memories rather than sensations." [3] In literature and music, this is particularly evident. Poetically and dramatically, the final scene in *Hamlet* is not four hours later than the first one, nor are the closing strains of a symphony forty minutes later than the opening ones. For the first scene is still vivid in our minds as we witness the final curtain; and the opening notes are still echoing in our minds as we listen to the last. Aesthetic composition is incomparably more than a sheer sequence or a mere total of parts.

And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.

[3] Irwin Edman, *The World, the Arts and the Artist* (New York, 1928), p. 79.

(If the distinction between aesthetic and actual time seems to be mere quibbling, let it be remembered that the whole endless and futile insistence of the pseudo-classic purists on the observance of the "unity of time" derived from a confusion of the two: the elapsed time of the actual and of the dramatic "action," it was argued, should be *reasonably* commensurate.)

By insisting on the purely physical qualities of the symbols of poetry, although he elsewhere considers these symbols arbitrary or conventional—but, let it be repeated, arbitrary in a literal rather than an imaginative sense, conventional as symbols of mere speech rather than as symbols of aesthetic composition—Lessing would have been hard put to explain why Goethe, in one of the world's perfect poems, could, by means of *sounds moving* in time, express *repose* and *silence* as no painter has been able to express them with symbols which are both inaudible and static.

Ueber allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.

XI

THE FRUITFUL MOMENT

A conspicuous confusion of aesthetic and actual time occurs in Lessing's formulation of the "fruitful moment." Before examining this particular formulation, we should, however, note that Lessing bases his argument for the "moment" to be chosen by the artist on two altogether different principles. The first of these, which derives, incidentally, from Winckelmann, is aesthetically fitting; the second is not.

Winckelmann had written: "In the representation of characters, the artist has less freedom than the poet. The latter can paint them at those moments when the passions are not weakened. The former, however, inasmuch as he must choose the most beautiful in beautiful forms, is restricted to a certain degree in the expression of passions, which must not become detrimental to the form." [1] This proposition Lessing subscribes to; and, it is interesting to note, he uses it to refute Winckelmann's criticism of Virgil. It is, moreover, a pertinent principle, although we may not agree to the

[1] Cf. A. Schmarsow, *Erläuterungen und Kommentar zu Lessings Laokoon* (Leipzig, 1907), p. 14.

limitations implied by the "beautiful," for it properly adjudges the quality of the representation or expression in terms of the artistic medium.

But, when Lessing formulates the "fruitful moment," he introduces a new principle which is far from being sound. He holds that "that alone is fruitful which permits free play to the imagination. The more we see, the more we must be able to add in thought. The more we add in thought, the more we must believe we see." [2] Accordingly, Lessing holds that the artist should choose as the most impressive, not the climax of action, but the moment just before it and leading up to it.

It is surprising and disappointing that the word, "imagination," for which we repeatedly look in vain in so many passages of *Laokoon*, should here be introduced on the least "fruitful" occasion. And it is even more disappointing that it should not be the effective imagination of the artist but the vagrant imagination of the observer that Lessing has in mind. As if the fancy of an ordinary spectator could transcend the final treatment of a

[2] For complete quotation see above, ch. 1. It is possible that Lessing's argument was suggested by the following passage in Mendelssohn's review (1758) of Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* "Warum ist der Frühling die angenehmste Jahreszeit? warum gefällt ein junges Thier mehr, als ein erwachsenes? warum gefallen öfters unvollendete Risse mehr als vollendete? Aus keiner andern Ursache glaubt der Verf., als weil sich die Einbildungskraft dabei mehr verspricht, als sie vor sich hat. . . ." *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig, 1844), IV (I), 337.

Velasquez, or becomingly "add in thought" a single cubit to the stature of a Michel Angelo! As if the masterly conception of a Corot or a Titian were not an ultimate formulation but only an imperfectly phrased theme for the layman to improvise and improve upon!

Elsewhere in his treatise, Lessing unsoundly argues that the "transitory" cannot be artistically "represented"; but, at this point, he argues, with even less soundness, that artistic treatment should indicate transition. In both cases, as well as in various other cases which have been noted, Lessing is, logically, drawing pertinent conclusions from terms which, in themselves, are aesthetically impertinent. He persistently thinks of art as dealing, or not dealing, with action, sequence, and chronology; it is only rarely that he thinks of it, specifically and concretely, as *composition*.

In his conception of the fruitful moment, Lessing, just as insistently as Caylus had done, thinks of painting in terms of plot. Ignoring his subsequent distinction that the poet should treat actions in time whereas the painter should treat objects in space—a distinction which at least definitely hints that pictorial composition is primarily to be viewed in spatial rather than chronological perspective—Lessing strictly defines the scene of the artist in terms of sequence. His argument has pertinence

only if we reduce the function of the artist to that of a pictorial *narrator*, only if we look at his work in order to get a "story" (which is just as inept as listening to music in order to get "pictures"). This implication becomes explicit in the lines of Matthew Arnold's *Epilogue to Lessing's Laocoon*. Referring to the painter, Arnold writes:

> In outward semblance he must give
> A moment's life of things that live;
> Then let him choose his moment well,
> With power divine *its story* tell.

The artist thinks neither in terms of time, nor of action, nor of plot. He thinks in terms of his medium; and, in this respect, his work, contrary to Lessing's specification, does represent a climax and a culmination—not those of action or plot, which are beside the point, but a climax and a culmination in composition. A great work of art does not send our minds scurrying off in search of new and different scenes—last of all, a scene that is higher and more intense. It holds us and haunts us by its seeming inevitability—"thus and no further," it triumphantly proclaims. If it represented but a passing phase, how could it forever fascinate us? If its appeal is endlessly enduring, it is because it represents something endless and enduring—something that is timeless. Invariably, a masterpiece has the stamp of finality. In short, the sculptor or

painter does not choose the *moment* which is *temporally* the most *suggestive*; he chooses the *pose* which is *pictorially consummate.*

"What the artist brings to the particular experience is much more than his immediate experience of it." [3] Why should the painter spend long, weary days standing before his easel? Why should the author spend long, torturous years bending over his desk? Surely, it is in the conviction that the experience and insight so arduously gained may, in the high hour of their triumph, represent, not a solitary phase, but an assembly of all the moments that have gone into the development of their art. And so it is that a great painting by Da Vinci "represents" incomparably more than a temporal aspect, either of reality or of the artist himself. It "is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire." Here "all 'the ends of the world are come,' and the eyelids are a little weary."

*Com*position is just what the first syllable denotes. It is a gathering rather than an analysis of time, a concentration rather than an isolation of vision; it is assemblage, focus, intensification. A perfect portrait is hardly less than a composite biography—a biography of the artist as well as the subject.

[3] Howard Hannay, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

XII

THE VALUE OF DEFINITIONS

Before defining the nature of art, we should do well to consider the nature of definitions.

There is little positive virtue in definitions; and there is even less positive virtue in proofs. For nothing is so instinctively distrusted as a thing that is *proved*. And nothing is so readily forgotten.

The distrust is justly provoked; and the oblivion is fully deserved. After all, nothing that is essential *can* be proved—neither facts, nor feelings, nor thoughts. The only thing that can be proved is a proposition. And a proposition that is proved is only a self-evident abstraction. *Cogito, ergo sum!* Herewith, nothing essential is established. For the entity, whose mere existence is to be asserted in the conclusion, has already been definitely identified in the premise: the "I," which is announced in the "sum," is already operative in the "cogito."

Joubert has beautifully said there is no difficulty believing in God, provided we do not try to define him. It is not religion, but theology, which has constant recourse to definitions. And theology, far from being a manifestation of faith, is a confirmation of doubt. It is the most orthodox ex-

pression of scepticism, the most respectable refuge of the atheist.

It seems, indeed, the less we know about a subject, the more intent we are on defining it. That is why most intelligent people are suspicious of professors, and most intelligent professors are suspicious of professors of education.

A definition, in itself, has no propulsion. It will take us nowhere. Nor will a proper definition unlock the comprehension of a subject to us. Comprehension cannot come short of long, close, and sensitive inquiry. And such inquiry is most effectively revealed by description. That is why description is the only sort of demonstration which, of itself, is attractive and persuasive.

A fact which is clearly observed, a feeling which is maturely experienced, a concept which is thoroughly thought through, an experiment which is exactly conducted—none of these can have *proof*; and none of them requires it. All that is required is a becoming description.

Unfortunately, most description is not becoming; it is not exact, and it is not pertinent. And it is here—with most description, which is not becoming or exact or pertinent—that definitions are called for. For it is precisely with *reference* that definitions have to do. Although, in such cases, their function is essentially negative, it is none the less

valuable. Even though a definition will not unlock the door of comprehension, it will still permit us to pick the lock of false comprehension. Even though it will teach us nothing, it will keep us from being *mis*taught. And that is sufficient to be thankful for. While other minds are constantly shooting off at tangents, it is still a virtue to be able to think in a perfect circle.

XIII

THE DEFINITION OF ART

When Milton writes that poetry should be "simple, sensuous, impassioned," his description is becoming and exact; and there is not the slightest demand for a definition. We no sooner think of inquiring into the assumptions of proper discourse than we think of prying into the antecedents of polite breeding. But, when Schiller describes "beauty" as "freedom in appearance," we inevitably balk. For Schiller is here trying to describe the immediate by the remote, and to define the actual in terms of the problematic. Beauty is the most concrete thing in the world; and Schiller would identify it with a sheer abstraction. Such conceptual identity is so insecure that we are hardly surprised to find Goethe describing the highest achievement in art by a term which is the very denial of "freedom"—*Notwendigkeit*.[1]

Likewise, when Matthew Arnold describes literature as a "criticism of life," we are immediately suspicious, and feel that Arnold is more interested in criticism than in literature as such. And when he writes of Sophocles that he "saw life steadily

[1] *Italienische Reise*, Sept. 6, 1787.

and saw it whole," we surmise that he is more interested in the ethical than in the poetic outlook of the great Greek dramatist. After all, Gottsched saw life more steadily than Bürger; and Arnold saw it more "whole" than Shelley. Moreover, it has irreverently been suggested, there is a possibility that Sophocles did not see life in its entirety: maybe he saw only ninety-five and three-tenths percent of it.

Finally, when Aristotle defines art as the "representation" of "men in action," our suspicions are again aroused. We realize that Milton's simple observation is incomparably more to the point than the intellectually contrived formulas of Schiller, Arnold, and Aristotle. The reason is obvious. Milton is clearly, immediately, and vividly thinking in terms of art. The others, by no means so forthright and decidedly more calculating, are primarily interested in metaphysical or moral values; and, in place of describing art, they are trying to adjust it to their dominant interests. It is altogether permissible to view art in the perspective of other values; but its identity should not be denied or disparaged in favor of these.

To resume! The fact that art is not an *independent* manifestation does not mean that it is not a *distinctive* one. Nor, on the other hand, does the fact that it is a distinctive manifestation imply that it is an *isolated* one. Art is not spontaneously

generated in a kind of artificial ether; and it cannot exclusively reverberate in a sort of aesthetic vacuum. Like all other aspects of human endeavor, it may be *oriented* in relation to other aspects; but it cannot be *defined* in terms of such relations: it must be defined in terms of itself. It should also be added that, no matter how manifold and intimate the associations of art may be, *relation* or *reference* does not amount to *correspondence* or *conformity*.

Art may be considered in terms of (1) its object or subject, (2) the artist, (3) the spectator or auditor, (4) its physical means, (5) its aesthetic medium. The last consideration alone is altogether pertinent. And the other considerations are valid only in so far as they are subordinated to it.

Whatever we may call art—whether representation, or creation, or expression, or communication —this much should be clear. The artist has two indirect allegiances—first, his attachment to his object or subject; secondly, his attachment to the spectator or auditor. But he has only one direct allegiance—the attachment to his medium.

What is the substance of art? What is its meaning? What is its form? If we properly answer one of these questions, we have answered them all.

We may describe art as a revelation of the

"things of nature." If we do, we have merely given it the status of photography or transcription.

We may describe it as a revelation of the "nature of things." If we do, we have done better; but we still have given it only a scientific or philosophic status.

We may, again, describe it as a revelation of the emotional and intellectual experience of the artist. This is closer to the truth, but it is still inadequate. It gives art only a psychological status. The emotions of the artist must be arranged; and his thoughts must be articulate. To feel aimlessly is to feel ineffectively; and to think inarticulately is hardly to think at all.

We may, further, describe art as the revelation of an imaginative experience. This is even closer; but it still is not close enough. In the first place, imagination may be no less irresponsible than emotion; and, in the second place, imagination, which is responsible, is no less active in the work of a great astronomer or mathematician than it is in the work of a sculptor or an author.

Let us turn to a specific example, one of the loveliest of lyrics, beginning:

Meine Ruh ist hin,
Mein Herz ist schwer,
Ich finde sie nimmer
Und nimmermehr.

In what terms shall we evaluate it?

The story of its genesis, thanks to *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, is clear. Goethe, while a student in Strasburg, fell in love with a rural pastor's daughter, Friederike Brion. Shortly afterwards, he left Strasburg. A few years later, the above lines were written. Was it the rare quality of Friederike which determined the quality of the poem? Hardly. Friederike, charming as she was, was apparently no better or no worse than dozens of lovely rural maidens in her own or any other day. Was it the rare intensity of Goethe's love? This love could scarcely have been so intense and engrossing, or he would not have forsaken the unfortunate girl. Or was it Goethe's imaginative exaltation of this love? This does much to account for the rare beauty of the poem; but it still falls far short. For the imaginative exaltation of Goethe's self-appointed rival and *Doppelgänger*, Lenz, who also fell in love with Friederike, was no less striking, seemingly more so. What accounts, immediately and fully, for the incomparable beauty of Goethe's poetic achievement was none of these. It was his rare ability to control and articulate his imaginative reaction and, thus, to fashion it, completely and radiantly, into an *aesthetic* experience.

Art, then, is the articulation of an aesthetic experience. This, alone, is a proper definition. And now that we have arrived at it, we realize it is sheer

redundancy. The aesthetic articulation and the aesthetic experience are one—"only when the painting is completed is the original vision matured." [2] It is not a question of representation, but of downright identity.

It is the same with all proper definitions. A proper definition is only an exercise in grammar. It consists in making the two ends of a sentence meet. If this seems but idle pastime, let us be reminded of Montaigne's wise observation that all our quarrels are essentially grammatical.

[2] Howard Hannay, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

XIV

PAINTING—SCULPTURE—POETRY

Lessing, we have observed, is inclined to neglect the qualities of aesthetic articulation. This is most apparent in his consideration of painting and sculpture. At no point does he effectively differentiate between the two; usually he lumps them both under the heading of "formative arts" (*bildende Künste*) or merely "painting" (*Malerei*); and his discussion is, on the whole, uncertain and schematic. In the preface, he announces that his argument is directed against a "mania for description" in poetry and a "penchant for excessive allegorizing" in painting; but against the latter he has surprisingly little to say in the course of his treatise; and, in one passage, he makes it a point to argue that, under certain circumstances, allegory is the only legitimate means with which the painter can compete with the poet.[1] He specifies that "figures and colors" are the physical mediums of the painter; but to color he is not only indifferent but even hostile. It is the sheer reproductive quality of art that largely interests him. The qualification, "formative," which indicates that the artist is constructing, developing,

[1] Ch. X.

shaping something which is significant in itself, scarcely impressed itself upon Lessing's attention. What does the artist see and feel and strive for? What is he really *about*? What effects is he actually *after*? These questions the reader of *Laokoon* must repeatedly formulate and answer for himself.

Lessing's argument with regard to poetic "imitation," as compared with the manner of the painter, is far from consistent. He begins by arguing that the poet should not *paint* a body (except by means of action); he then shifts and argues that he should not *describe* it; he shifts again and argues that he should not describe it by an *enumeration of details;* and he ends by arguing that he should not describe it by an *unimaginative* and *indiscriminate* enumeration of details.

As regards this conclusion, the simple reply is: well, neither should the painter. "Frigid description" (*frostige Beschreibung*), "piecemeal depictions" (*stückweise Schilderungen*), and "frigid elaborations of detail" (*frostige Ausmalungen*),[2] which Lessing condemns in poetry, are no less reprehensible in painting. The artist who *describes* by laboriously piling on detail after detail, without any sense of composition, any regard for proportion, and any consideration of dominant effects, is every bit as hapless as the author who does so.

[2] Chs. XVI, XXI, XVIII.

In support of his contention, Lessing cites a thoroughly pedestrian performance by Haller, which he unduly enhances for his purposes by calling it a "masterpiece in its fashion," painted "with great skill." (In place of "skill"—*Kunst*—the term "industry"—*Fleiss*—would have been decidedly more fitting.) But this example carries little weight. Any artist who composed as prosaically and mechanically as Haller would be no less ineffective. Sheer botanical or zoological description has no proper displacement in any art; and Gerard Dou, "who painted every feather on a bird, every scale of a fish," is, today, just as forgotten as the author of *The Alps*, who "painted, but painted without a semblance of illusion." [3]

Lessing, in trying to fix the limitations of the poet, as compared with the painter, uses the terms "imitate," "paint," and "describe" rather loosely and interchangeably. The fundamental distinction to be made is that the poet naturally cannot *visualize* things as specifically as the painter; and this, contrary to Lessing's contention, applies to "actions" as much as it does to "bodies."

An important phase of Lessing's argument hinges on his theory of vision. He writes: "How do we acquire a clear perception of a thing in space? First we observe its parts individually, then the

[3] Ch. XVII.

connection of these parts, and finally the whole. Our senses carry out the various operations with such astonishing rapidity that these seem to us to be but a single one; and this rapidity is inevitably necessary if we are to have a conception of the whole, which is nothing more than the total of the conceptions of the parts and of their connection." [4]

As far as actual perception goes, Lessing's theory, it has been adequately pointed out, is psychologically incorrect.[5] But there is an even stronger objection to be raised. Lessing's theory is aesthetically impertinent. Again, the distinction between mere physical sight and aesthetic perception must be made. However we may observe a scene in real life, it is with altogether different eyes that we look upon a painting. For a painting is *composed;* and the arrangement which strikes and guides our sight is a pre-arrangement on the part of the artist. Our eye does not scamper helter-skelter, picking up individual parts with "astonishing rapidity," and then assembling and constructing them into the "whole" it sees fit. The whole is already there for us; it is the first thing we see and the one thing we should never cease to see. The assembling and constructing has been done by

[4] Ch. XVII.

[5] Cf. F. E. Bryant, *A History of English Balladry and other Studies* (Boston, 1913), p. 241ff.

the artist; that, precisely, is the function of his composition.

Being composed, a picture is to be seen just in the way the artist wants us to see it. Particularly in etchings and wood-cuts, there are details which we never see *individually;* and there are others which we never see clearly—unless we cease to look at the work as a work of art. We may look at Dürer's *Melancholy* a hundred times without being able to recount from memory a fifth of the assembled details. These are not supposed to be seen clearly; they are supposed to represent an accumulation cluttering and oppressing the mind of the central figure, on which our attention is inevitably fixed.

In painting, many of the details are wilfully suppressed. In Holbein's *Erasmus*, we see the side of a face and a pair of hands; in Dürer's *Saint John*, we are aware of a gleaming eye, the sweep of a robe, and two hands and a foot which protrude; Cézanne's *Portrait of the Artist* shows the upper part of the face and a conspicuous ear between a beard and a skull cap; and *Mona Lisa* is an enigmatic woman cut off at the waist. Lessing does not seem to suspect that a collection of the world's great portraits would be a gallery of grotesque and illustrious cripples.

What, precisely, does the artist try to do? Does

he essentially try to *describe?* The answer is obviously no.

Does he try to give us a *clear perception* of the whole? The answer is again no.

Does he try to give us an *impression* of the whole? The answer, to be exact, is still no.

What the artist tries to give us is a *whole impression*—a unified and concentrated effect which is, not a real, but a compositional whole. And this, we shall find, is just what the *poet* tries to do.

The fundamental distinctions between sculpture and painting, which Lessing is disposed to ignore, are considerable. Although sculpture is three-dimensional in its structure, it is essentially two-dimensional in its effect. And painting, although it is two-dimensional in its structure, is essentially three-dimensional in its effect. A statue is to be looked *at;* a painting is to be looked *into.* A painting recedes. When we step away from one on the wall, we are doing just what the painting itself would like to do—to get through its background. But a statue rises from a base; and, if it were to topple, it would fall into our arms. For a statue comes from its background, actual or imaginary; it is the perfect liberation from a relief.

Sculpture is more rugged; it is bolder than painting. The latter—and, in this respect, it is much closer to poetry than to sculpture—is much more

intimate. We don't mind if a statue stands on an open square in all sorts of wind and weather; we don't mind looking at it under such conditions; and, furthermore, we don't mind if there are dozens of others gathered there with us. But a painting is something to be sheltered and enclosed, and it is to be contemplated in private. A statue harangues us; a painting, like a poem, converses with us. It is as painful to have someone at our side while we look at a familiar picture as it is to have someone peering over our shoulder as we peruse a favorite volume.

Sculpture is a communal art. If the Greeks achieved greater things in sculpture than in painting, it was largely because they cherished service to community and state, because they prized citizenship far more highly than privacy, "idiocy" in their own tongue. It was for much the same reason, the lack of a sense of privacy, that Lessing was primarily interested in sculpture, and had no appreciation of landscape painting. Sculpture, like oratory, is a public manifestation; painting, like poetry, is a private revelation.

A statue, which is carved, is *brought out* of stone; a picture, which is painted, is *put on* canvas. A painting must have a material surface which holds it together, a frame (the edges of the canvas are rigidly arbitrary, whatever the contours of the

picture may be), and physical mediums, which are varied. In a piece of sculpture, material surface, frame, and physical medium are one. In short, the elements of sculpture are homogeneous, and its appeal is simple. But the elements of painting are differentiated, and its appeal is complex. Again, in this respect, painting is much more similar to poetry than to sculpture. Both painting and poetry are heterogeneous in their elements. There are a dozen and one qualities *in* a poem, as there are in a painting. But there is nothing *in* a statue. It is all form and mass.

Diversity and elaboration, range, suggestiveness, insinuation, subtlety which falls to a whisper, and intimacy which almost breathes a hush—all these, which are denied to the sculptor, the poet shares with the painter. How academic and brittle Lessing's rather mathematical distinction between time and space, how arbitrary and tenuous his rather scientific distinction between bodies and actions become when we consider them in the light of the varied resources at the command of the painter as well as the poet! The quality of the poet's imagery is determined less significantly by the nature of "action" than by the aesthetic nature of language, which is, immediately and sensuously, his medium. And the quality of a painter's or sculptor's imagery is determined less by the nature of "space" than

by the aesthetic nature of marble and bronze or of pigments, which are, immediately and sensuously, their mediums. As regards variety of detail, composition, and effect, painting is usually much more closely allied to poetry than to sculpture. The manifold colors and shades on the palette of the painter have considerably more in common with the range and flexibility of the poet's vocabulary than they have with the consistently stubborn, inevitably compact, and thoroughly uniform stone or metal of the sculptor. Perspective, color, tone, pitch, atmosphere, illumination, warmth—all these qualities, a painter again has in common with the poet; and none of them does he share with the sculptor.

Sculpture is almost restricted to detached naked or semi-naked bodies, whereas painting, together with poetry, can picturesquely and effectively deal with clothing and ornament, background and setting, interior as well as exterior. A room with its furnishings; a house with its lawn and garden; landscape, sunshine and moonlight, stars and forests and lakes and rolling sea—all these beckon to the painter no less than to the poet; but they are all beyond the range of the sculptor.

How hauntingly the mood and effects sought in painting may be expressed by words has been demonstrated by an artist himself. In a famous

passage of his *Ten O'Clock*, Whistler wrote: "When the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairyland is before us—then the wayfarer hastens home; the working man and the cultured one, the wise man and the one of pleasure, cease to understand as they have ceased to see, and Nature, who, for once, has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master, her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her." Such is the vision of the artist; and it is in the land of his living dream, where the whole city hangs in the heavens, and the working man and the cultured one have hastened home, that the painter and the poet are come to meet.

By virtue of the essential qualities which Lessing ignored—the pitch of colors, the rhythm of hues, the scale of tones—the effects of painting, especially those of water colors and pastels, at times, even resemble the effects of music more than those of sculpture. "A tone drawing is like a musical scale. You may play your scale in the bass or in the treble, that is, you may start with black and relatively work up to half-tone, or again you may begin with your half-tone and work to white paper. The

key you work in does not matter so long as your values are relatively harmonious. It is the jarring note in the scale that kills the harmony." [6] Degas' *Dancer on the Stage*, which is quivering with lyric ecstasy, rhythmic light, and melodic buoyancy, is an utter denial of the sculptural qualities of weight, mass, and compactness; and Whistler, highly critical, knew very well what he was about when he labelled certain of his paintings "Nocturnes." His have the same aristocratic mastery of limited means which we find in Chopin's Nocturnes, the same nervous but precise feeling for line, the same filament-like intensity, vibrant but never reverberating, and the same exquisite felinity, which would have been wholesomely spoiled if either master had "weighed thirty pounds more."

In *Laokoon*, Lessing is not primarily interested in painting as such; and he is not attracted to poetry as a whole. He is primarily interested in the most objective and detached of all the arts—namely, sculpture; and he is attracted to the most objective and detached form of poetry—namely, the epic. As a result—and this is the great paradox of *Laokoon*—after dismissing the sculptor from the house of poetry in his correction of Winckelmann's principle, Lessing admits him again through another door in the name of his own principles. For

[6] Romilly Fedden, cited by Opdyke, *op. cit.*, pp. 183–84.

—to use the terminology of Nietzsche—it is not the Dionysiac (musical) but the Apollonian (plastic) qualities of Homeric poetry that Lessing stresses; and it is the sculptural effects that he emphasizes. The absence of lyric mood and color, the severity and simplicity of "description," the sharply carved outline, the austerity and ruggedness of spirit—all these qualities, which Lessing especially praises in Homer, would be no less becoming in a statue. Hence, it is not surprising that in Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea*, which is consciously the most Homeric work in German literature, characters, gestures, and language should frequently strike us as carved, and that in one oft-cited passage the sculptural analogy should be frankly proclaimed.

So stand er,
Starr wie ein Marmorbild, vom ernsten Willen gebändigt,
Drückte nicht fester sie an, er stemmte sich gegen die Schwere.

XV

POETIC "PAINTING"

The simple fact remains. Authors incessantly do *paint*, and effectively so. But sculptors seldom do, and never effectively.

> Full many a glorious morning have I seen
> Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
> Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
> Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.[1]

This is supreme painting. Never was dawn more splendidly flashed across a canvas. Turner, who showed the *Sun rising through Vapour*, and Claude, who first "set the sun in the heavens," never painted a more gorgeous landscape; nor did the Impressionistic apostles of light ever release more effectively the miraculous sources of color and illumination. Such is the "heavenly alchemy" of poetic imagination and diction; and of such Lessing has little to tell us in *Laokoon*.

In view of Lessing's argument, it should be ob-

[1] With Shakespeare's painting of dawn compare Goethe's painting of evening.

> Ich säh im ewigen Abendstrahl
> Die stille Welt zu meinen Füssen,
> Entzündet alle Höhn, beruhigt jedes Tal,
> Den Silberbach in goldne Ströme fliessen.

served that the effects attained by Shakespeare in these lines are very much the same as those achieved by a fine painting. After all, every art has the same point of departure, which is human sensibility; and every one has the same destination, which, again, is human sensibility. The only fundamental difference is the varied nature of the routes they must traverse. But even these routes, varied as they may be, will converge at certain points, and open on the same vista.

Early in *Laokoon*, Lessing, as we have noted, held that both the poet and the painter were justified in "imitating" the same object, provided each did it in his own way; and this principle, if we overlook the inadequacy of the term, imitation, is sound. It is unfortunate that Lessing, at this point, did not undertake a consistent examination of the *ways* of the poet, on the one hand, and those of the painter or sculptor, on the other. For such an examination would inevitably have led to an analysis of aesthetic mediums, which is the only fundamental problem involved. But, as we have likewise noted, instead of pursuing this inquiry, which he incisively had in mind in his refutation of Winckelmann, Caylus, and Spence, Lessing shifted to a different direction and, in the course of this fresh tack, set up a series of new general distinctions which are neither sound nor fundamental, but arbi-

trary and secondary. The nature of the "object" or "subject," which is represented is—to reiterate —a subordinate consideration, and can be determined only in terms of the aesthetic medium. The same holds for the qualities of time and space. When Lessing finally does examine the mediums of the painter and the poet, it is sheer physical properties rather than aesthetic qualities which he considers.

In a passage which seems suddenly and strangely rhetorical, Lessing cries: "Paint for us, poet, the delight, the affection, the love, the ecstasy which beauty stimulates, and you will have painted beauty itself." Hereupon he quotes four lines from Ovid:

> Quos humeros, quales vidi tetigique lacertos!
> Forma papillarum quam fuit apta premi!
> Quam castigato planus sub pectore venter!
> Quantum et quale latus! quam juvenile femur!

These lines, Lessing is obliged to admit, are a refutation of his argument that the poet cannot paint by enumeration of details. Instead of acknowledging the legitimacy of Ovid's achievement, Lessing, however, is set on affirming the validity of his own strictures; and, accordingly, he labels the poet's imagination "lascivious intoxication" (*wollüstige Trunkenheit*). This sounds decidedly more like a moral censure than an aesthetic compliment.

By operating with the term, "imitation," and by fixing his attention too insistently on "objects," Lessing—again to repeat—is concerned with the actual passions and emotions which the poet "represents" rather than the imaginative passion and emotion which reside in poetry itself. But it is the latter alone which primarily count. All the emotion in the world on the part of the characters (or on the part of the author) still does not constitute poetry. This is evident in Lessing's own *Emilia Galotti*. The heroine is supposed to be deeply moved and perturbed; but we must take her word and the words of other characters for it. Her passion does not permeate the language of the play and set it vibrant; it is merely reported.

It is again evident in Lessing's discussion of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* in a chapter which would have been more suitable to the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* than it was to *Laokoon*. Lessing goes to great lengths to commend Sophocles for having Philoctetes writhe and moan and groan in genuine accents of pain. But all he succeeds in demonstrating is that the great Greek dramatist was, in this particular instance, capable of outright naturalism. Such treatment, far from being commendable, would, if put into general practice, lead to all sorts of crudities and absurdities, as it actually

did in the hands of recent Expressionistic dramatists.

> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story.

That, and not

> A, a, pheu, atattai, o moi, moi,

is the genuine dramatic and poetic expression of tragic grief.

> Ach neige,
> Du Schmerzenreiche,
> Dein Antlitz gnädig meiner Not!

That, and not

> Gewalt! Gewalt! wer kann der Gewalt nicht trotzen? Was Gewalt heisst, ist nichts: Verführung ist die wahre Gewalt!—

is the genuine expression of tragic despair.

Lessing frequently misconstrues the poet's intentions, and misrepresents his effects. He finds that Sophocles was capable of confirming "the *idea* of physical pain," and holds that Homer wanted "to give us a *concept*" of Helen's beauty. But, as Grillparzer would have reminded him, it is, not ideas or comprehensibility, but "sensuous embodiment" which "makes poetry what it is." The purpose of poetry is to create an impression, not to develop a concept.

It is, in fact, only an "idea" of Helen's beauty that Homer gives us in the famous scene cited by Lessing; it is by no means a vivid or poetic impression. The incident itself is memorable, but not the language in which it is couched. Homer is not even giving us a stirring account of the impression Helen has made upon the old men. He is merely recording it. There is no *poetic* impact upon the mind of the reader. The simple evidence is that the verse of Homer can be turned into ordinary prose, a sheer chronicle style, and the effect is not lost. Much more pertinent to Lessing's argument would have been the lines of Marlowe, which do enchantingly paint "the delight, the affection, the love, the ecstasy which beauty stimulates," and which are justly famous *as poetry:*

> Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships
> And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
> Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.

If Homer does not give us a full and vivid impression of Helen's beauty, it is not because he could not, but because he apparently did not want to.[2] He was writing an heroic epic of war and of manly deeds; and an elaboration of feminine charms

[2] There is, of course, considerably more descriptive writing in Homer, especially in the *Odyssey*, than Lessing would have us believe. This was already indicated by Lessing's own friend, Nicolai (cf. Blümner, *op. cit.*, p. 364, note), and more recently demonstrated by Bryant (*op. cit.*, p. 263ff.).

would have been out of keeping with the rugged, virile spirit of the poem as a whole.[3] Helen, with her insidious fascination, belongs in the background; and that is where Homer keeps her. But Ariosto was writing a romantic epic of adventure and love; and, in keeping with the spirit of his poem, he was altogether justified in giving us an expansive and indulgent elaboration of Alcina's seductive beauty. As the personal charms of this enchantress had a great displacement in the mind of the hero, so the description of those charms should becomingly have a comparable displacement in the lines of the poem. (Lessing, incidentally, is ill-advised in arguing that "all that still pleases and moves us in the painting of Alcina is grace. The impression which her eyes make derives, not from the fact that they are black and sparkling, but from the fact that they

Pietosi à riguardar, à mover parchi,

glance about with charm and slowly turn, that Amor hovers around them and shoots his whole quiver from them." Such allegory—having Cupid discharge his arrows in order to give the impression of love and loveliness—is no less inadequate in

[3] It is for the same reason that we look for such elaborations, not in the mediaeval *Heldenepos*, but in the *Ritterroman*.

poetry than in painting; and, in an earlier passage, Lessing himself finds it even more so.) [4]

Although it was not fitting for Homer, in a heroic epic, to give an elaborate description of feminine beauty, it was altogether fitting for him to give an elaborate description of a shield. And it was fitting for him to give a description of the *making of* the shield, rather than one of the finished product, not because—as Lessing argues—an *object* can be more effectively *described* in action than at rest, but because Homer is writing an epic of *action* —heroic endeavor, hardship, and struggle. He describes the making of the shield at the forge for the same reason that he describes the use of the shield in battle, and for the same reason that he describes other actions in battle, or on land or at sea—the launching of a vessel, the performance of a sacrifice, or the preparation of a feast. Lessing is again beside the point when he insists that Homer "has painted the shield with such detail and such exactness that it would not be hard for modern artists to make a drawing which would coincide with it in all parts," for, among dozens of commentators, scarcely two have agreed as to just how the

[4] "Wenn der Künstler eine Figur mit Sinnbildern auszieret, so erhebt er eine blosse Figur zu einem höhern Wesen. Bedienet sich aber der Dichter dieser malerischen Ausstaffierungen, so macht er aus einem höhern Wesen eine Puppe." Ch. X.

shield really looked.[5] Moreover, it is quite inconsistent for Lessing to introduce such an argument. By insisting that Homer's description is such as might readily be reproduced by an artist, he is again raising the invidious ghost of Caylus which he had been at such pains to lay.

Whether or not the poet can *visualize* particular objects or actions is not the essential consideration. "What is required will be found if we turn our attention from the sensory qualities of the imagery to the more fundamental qualities upon which its efficacy in modifying the rest of the experience depends. . . . Instances in plenty may be found in which a full development of the sensory aspect of images is damaging to their effects. Meredith is a master of this peculiar kind of imagery:

> Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
> The union of this ever-diverse pair!
> These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
> Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.

The emotional as well as the intellectual effects of the various images here suggested are much impaired if we produce them vividly and distinctly." [6] Yet it is the possibilities of sheer visualization that

[5] Lessing is much more pertinent when, later in the same chapter (XVIII), he writes: "Wir sehen nicht das Schild, sondern den göttlichen Meister, wie er das Schild verfertiget."

[6] I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1930), pp. 123–24.

Lessing repeatedly commends in Homer,[7] and it is the absence of these possibilities that he deplores in Ariosto. "Just as if," Herder protests, "the poet were obliged to have the figures, which he described, etched on copper!" [8]

Referring to Homer's description of the chariot of Juno, Lessing assures us that "we *see* the wheels, the axles," etc. But this remarkable capacity for visualization would, after all, be of interest only to a wheelwright or a carpenter. With regard to the apparel of Agamemnon, whom Homer has dress "before our eyes, garment by garment," Lessing insists that we "*see* the clothes." But what aesthetic virtue is there in the visualization of Agamemnon's underwear, and what poetic delight are we to find in an apt reproduction of the nether parts of his wardrobe? Again, Homer is not interested in a mere picture—*um das blosse Bild.*[9] He is concerned with giving us an impression of the lives and conduct of his characters—their simple, rugged routine and their familiar activity.

[7] It should be indicated that Lessing is frequently inconsistent in the use of his terms. All of the following he uses more or less interchangeably: "imitate"—*nachahmen* (ch. VII), "paint"—*malen* (ch. XVII), "depict"—*schildern* (ch. XVII), "describe"—*beschreiben* (ch. VII), "express"—*ausdrücken* (ch. XVII), and "visualize"—*sehen lassen* (ch. XVI).

[8] Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

[9] Ch. XVI.

If it is mere description the author wants to give, he is just as well off trying to picture an object or a person at rest as he is trying to picture one in action. Possibly better off, for rest is usually simpler to describe than movement, a fixed line is easier to catch and transfer than a fluid one, and a pose is more graphic than a transition for the poet as well as the painter.

> Droben stehet die Kapelle,
> Schauet still ins Tal hinab—

That is as graphic and definite as poetry can be. A boxer lying prostrate on the floor is easier to fix in the mind and to depict than the action leading up to the knock-out; and, if description is all that is required, an author can surely do as much with a quiet lake as with a rushing brook.

Lessing's whole argument against enumerative description is based on an assumption which is untenable in the case of every effective author. This assumption is that the author recounts to the reader "with the intention of giving him a picture of the whole." [10] Now, as in the case of the painter, the aesthetic intention of the author is less to give a picture of the whole than to give an impression of the whole and less to give an impression of the

[10] Ch. XVIII.

whole than to give a whole impression. And this obtains whether he is describing bodies or actions.

It is certain dominant, pervading effects towards which the author aims through composition; and, to be impressed by these effects, we are no more supposed to be fully aware of each word, or "symbol," than we are supposed to be fully aware of every brush stroke in a painting. Let us hear an eminent contemporary artist describe a former acquaintance:

"Hudson would walk in with his strange, rather crab-like walk; very tall he was, a little awkward as he sat himself down and disposed of his long limbs, folding his large, beautifully formed hands across his knees. He had haunting eyes, brown with yellow lights, eyes that scarcely moved in their orbits, but remained level, fixed on no particular point, held rather by memories of things past, than by what was before them. His cheekbones were wide and prominent (once he said he had Indian blood in his veins), and his jaw seemed narrow by comparison, a narrowness emphasized by the shape of his beard. His fine, slightly narrowing brow was deeply furrowed, and his nose was that of a predatory bird. Yes, he put me in mind of those sad, caged eagles at the Zoo, whose motionless eyes look out beyond the bars of their

cages, as they sit, desolate prisoners, their wings unused and drooping, through the long dull days." [11]

That is surely "doing a portrait" in words as effectively as it could be done in paint.

There was, we have noted, no fitting occasion for Homer to give us a vivid and sustained impression of Helen's beauty in the *Iliad*. But in *Hermann und Dorothea*, an epic which, in many respects, was consciously written in the Homeric manner, the situation is different. Goethe was writing an idyllic love poem; and a vivid and sustained impression of the heroine was called for. Accordingly, in one passage, we are given an enumerative description. It is true that the immediate purpose of the lines in question was to help two friends of the hero identify Dorothea; but the description is, none the less, a poetically effective one.

Aber ich geb' euch noch die Zeichen der reinlichen Kleider:
Denn der rote Latz erhebt den gewölbeten Busen,
Schön geschnürt, und es liegt das schwarze Mieder ihr knapp an;
Sauber hat sie den Saum des Hemdes zur Krause gefaltet,
Die ihr das Kinn umgibt, das runde, mit reinlicher Anmut;
Frei und heiter zeigt sich des Kopfes zierliches Eirund;
Stark sind vielmal die Zöpfe um silberne Nadeln gewickelt;
Vielgefaltet und blau fängt unter dem Latze der Rock an
Und umschlägt ihr im Gehn die wohlgebildeten Knöchel.

[11] William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories* (New York, n.d.) II, 40.

It is not a picture which we here see; it is an impression that we receive—an impression of cleanliness, health, and strength. And this is the impression which is elsewhere developed and fortified in the poem. So much so that we may ask: "is there another heroine of modern poetry who so instinctively leads us to feel that virtue and charm are the forthright expression of bodily health, vigor, and comeliness?"

XVI

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *LAOKOON*

The author of *Laokoon* had no significant predecessors in German literature; and he has had no successors. Lessing was a man apart in his day; and thus he has remained. Although, in point of time, he looms on the threshold of modern German literature, it was not from him that this literature received its great impetus. Rather it was from Klopstock, Hamann, and Herder; and from others across the frontiers—Rousseau, Ossian, the English ballads, and a Shakespeare, who, to the new generation of the Storm and Stress, was an altogether different figure from the Shakespeare whom Lessing had represented as an incorporation of the dramatic law and whom he had readily linked with the authority of Aristotle.

Lessing's sight was critically fixed on the centuries that had gone before; it did not swim in the engaging but vague prospects of a romantic future. Unlike Rousseau, Hamann, and Herder, he did not urge a new and thrilling beginning; instead, he sternly recommended a discriminate, enlightened re-examination of the past. The torch

which Lessing lighted he did not want to pass on to the eager hands of a youthful generation. Staunchly, independently, he held it aloft for the contemplation of mature, responsible humanity; and there it still gleams—unflickering and timeless.

Whatever quarrels Lessing may have had with Corneille, Voltaire, and others, his indebtedness to the fundamentally rational spirit of the French tradition was greater than that of any other eminent German author. Herder had a lot to dissent with in *Laokoon;* and the Romanticists had even more; but Racine and Boileau,[1] with their standards of reasoned discipline and restraint, classic measure, and the *genre tranché*, would have found little. Likewise, La Fontaine, who had written:

> Les mots et les couleurs ne sont choses pareilles,
> Ni les yeux ne sont les oreilles.

It is only fitting that Lessing should have thought of publishing an enlarged edition of *Laokoon* in French and that he should actually have written a part of the preface, in which he avows: "Several years have passed since I published the beginning in German. I am going to edit it again and to give the continuation in French

[1] It is worth observing that the author of *Laokoon*, like the author of *L'Art Poétique* almost a century earlier, is not concerned with the novel as a literary genre.

inasmuch as this language is, in such matters, as familiar to me as the other. The German language, although in no wise inferior to the French, if it is properly handled, is yet to be formed, even to be created, for several types of composition, of which this is not the least. . . . Meanwhile, the French language, already created and formed, is at hand." [2]

Historically, in fact, *Laokoon* is the pertinent sequence to Batteux's *Beaux arts réduits à un même principe*, which had appeared twenty years earlier. The "same principle," to which Batteux reduces the arts, is naturally "imitation"; and this is the fundamental principle which Lessing himself accepts. Referring to painting and poetry in his *Laokoon* notes, he makes this acceptance as specific as possible: "Both are arts of imitation and have all the rules in common which follow from this conception of imitation." [3] Batteux was definitely thinking in the Aristotle-Horace-Renaissance tradition; and it was this tradition which Lessing no less definitely followed. Irving Babbitt was fully justified in holding that Lessing "looks in his critical method backward to the Renaissance, rather than forward to the nineteenth century." [4]

Like Batteux, and other predecessors, the author

[2] *LM.*, XIV, 439–40.

[3] Blümner, *op. cit.*, pp. 353–54.

[4] *The New Laokoon* (Boston, 1910), p. 40.

of *Laokoon* had his eye set, not on his own particular age, but on the perspective of European literature as a whole. Although Lessing, by the vigorous and somewhat dramatic tone of his argument, would make it appear so, there was no urgent call for *Laokoon, as it is oriented,*[5] at the time it appeared. The problems agitated were by no means active in the stormy atmosphere of contemporary discussion. They came, as it were, from the clear sky of Lessing's rational circumspection. The abuses he wished to abolish were so old, so general, and so academic that they were inoffensively typified by a traditional fragment from Horace—*ut pictura poesis.* This phrase had been so often and so vaguely cited that it had acquired all the pallor and innocuousness of a truism. *Ut pictura poesis* never constituted a threat or a *Program;* it never became the pernicious slogan for any particular school, and it never was virulently adopted by any particular author of importance as the justification of a new and disturbing practice. Moreover, for every European poet, artist, or critic who had more or less impertinently raised this dictum, there was at least another one, no less eminent, who had pertinently questioned its validity. Diderot, Mendelssohn, Burke, Shaftes-

[5] It should be indicated at this point that Lessing, in *Laokoon*, was altogether indifferent to Rousseau's appearance and import.

bury, Dubos, and numerous others—to all of these Lessing was indebted for fundamental ideas; Spence, whom he so vigorously discredited, had practically formulated Lessing's definition, "grace is beauty in motion"; and Caylus, whom he so roundly denounced, had shrewdly enunciated at least one of the most important principles of *Laokoon*.[6]

Certain commentators have felt that *Laokoon* was specifically directed against the theories or practices of Breitinger, Bodmer, Brockes, and Haller. If this is the case, then Lessing was hardly more than a "sham giant" fighting against "real pygmies." Breitinger's *Poetics* appeared in 1741; Bodmer's *Reflections on the Poetic Images of Authors*, the same year; the first volume of Brockes' *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* was published in 1721, and his translation of Thomson's *Seasons*, in 1745; Haller's *Alpen* appeared in 1732. Refuting the implications of these works in 1766 was like "breaking in open doors."

Lessing's text itself reveals that his interests were much broader and his range far more extensive. His longest *abschreckendes Beispiel* is from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso;* the author whose "assiduous elaboration of pictorial detail" he contrasts, in his *Laokoon* notes, with the simplicity and economy of

[6] Cf. Howard, *op. cit.*, pp. LXXXVIII, LXXI.

Homer, is Milton; and, in the same notes, one of the conspicuous examples of "all too extravagant allegory," which he cites for demonstration, is Raphael's *School of Athens*.[7] Goethe felt that Lessing's deprecation of excessive allegory was levelled, in particular, against the sixteenth century, when it was customary to represent, "in German works of art and in poems, life in the form of a fool with cap and bells, death in the travesty of a rattling skeleton, as well as the inevitable and incidental evils of this world in the image of a grotesque devil." [8] (Parenthetically, it may be observed that Goethe himself, in keeping with the manner of his title-hero, employed elaborate allegory in one of the most refreshing poems of his earlier years, *Hans Sachsens poetische Sendung;* and it was a "grotesque devil" of older lore who, through the metamorphosis of Goethe's genius, became Mephistopheles, one of the most significant contributions to the world's gallery of great dramatic characters.) And Herder bemoaned, in his famous remonstrance, that it was upon all European literature, ancient as well as modern, that Lessing's critical axe had fallen. "From Tyrtaeus to Gleim, and from Gleim back to

[7] Cf. Blümner, *op. cit.*, pp. 443, 397.

[8] *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, part II, book 8.

Anacreon; from Ossian to Milton, and from Klopstock to Virgil, the swath is cut." [9]

Lessing, according to his own words, wished to draw a hard and fast line between the ancients and the moderns; and, in his Preface, he announced that it was the prerogative of the former "to have preserved a just mean in all things." This generality is obviously too neat. The *Laokoon* group, we have observed, is hardly to be cited as an example of classic restraint; we should have to look far in an exhibit of reputable modern sculpture to find a monstrosity comparable to the Farnese Bull; and Lessing himself noted as an "especially" reprehensible example of plastic allegory an ancient bas-relief representing the *Apotheosis of Homer*.[10] As for *Schilderungssucht*, Lessing observed, presumably the year after *Laokoon* was published, a notable example in Euripides' *Ion*. "That Euripides goes out of his way to moralize, is well known; and this I am ready to forgive him as a friend of Socrates. But that he goes out of his way to paint, I shall not forgive him." The incident Lessing has in mind is the messenger's announcement of the discovery of Creusa's plot against Ion. "The description of the tent, in which the deed was performed, and of the tapestries, with which

[9] Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

[10] Cf. Blümner, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

it was decorated, comprises close to thirty verses. Damned narrator! You yourself are trembling for your mistress, those who hear you are trembling for her and, at the same time, for themselves, for the angered mob may have them executed with their mistress; and you paint, for us, the texture of the tapestries, a whole starry heaven of silk." [11] Later in Greek literature, this tendency became more pronounced; of the Alexandrian Age, it has been said that the "mania for descriptive painting in poetry was characteristic." [12]

Moreover, like a constant thorn in Lessing's side, there remained the annoying fact that it was a prominent Greek author, Simonides, who had announced that "painting is silent poetry, and poetry is a speaking picture"—a formulation which "passed over into Hellenistic discussion on poetry and was repeated often." [13] It is neither effective nor becoming for Lessing to try to remove this thorn by disparaging, as the "Greek Voltaire," an author whom Matthew Arnold considers one of the "four great names" of the century "in which poetry made . . . the noblest, the most successful effort she has ever made as the priestess of the imaginative reason," [14] and whom an eminent

[11] *LM.*, XV, 428.

[12] Thomas S. Duncan, *The Influence of Art on Description in the Poetry of P. Papinius Statius* (Baltimore, 1914), pp. 8–9.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[14] *Essays* (Oxford, 1914), p. 161.

present-day critic has called "the master of the matured Greek lyric, and the earliest, as one may call him, of the supreme poets of Athens." [15] Tenaciously Lessing persisted, and maintained that Simonides' dictum was presumably not to be found in any Greek text-book (*Lehrbuch*). But, for that matter, in what modern text-book is it to be found?

While he surveyed the pages of past European literature, Lessing seems to have been utterly unaware that there had been writing at his very elbow, as it were, the author whose influence was destined to wash away the carefuliy aligned banks of *Laokoon* in a flood-tide of romantic extravagance. For, earlier in the same decade in which Lessing's treatise was published, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile* had appeared; and, while Lessing was extolling the economy of Homer's descriptions and commending the limitation of epithets in the *Iliad*, Rousseau was splashing whole pages with riotous painting and drenching his readers with an orgy of descriptive effusion. So great was the impetus given by Rousseau that the precedence of Haller, conspicuously cited by Lessing, could later be completely overlooked. Amiel, a fellow countryman of Haller as well as of Rousseau, wrote: "J. J. Rousseau is an ancestor in all things. It was he

[15] J. W. Mackail, *Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1911), p. 6.

who founded . . . literary botany before George Sand . . . and Alpine description before De Saussure." [16] It was due to Rousseau, more than to any other author, that the nineteenth century, in the words of Babbitt, "witnessed the greatest debauch of descriptive writing the world has ever known." [17]

Baroque extravagance in art and literature, prior to *Laokoon*, was, historically, a natural disintegration, an opening up, of the standards of the Renaissance; and the premises or foundations remained the same. But romantic extravagance, subsequent to *Laokoon*, was a dislocation and bursting of the premises or foundations themselves. Even where attempts to temper this revolt were made, the fundamental rupture was not healed; and the disagreement with Lessing is still evident. Schiller, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, which are essentially an effort to reconcile and transcend the principles of Rousseau and of Kant, wrote: "Music, in its supreme sublimation, must become plastic and must impress us with the serene strength of antiquity; formative art, in its supreme consummation, must become music and move us by its immediate, sensuous presence; poetry, in its highest development, must, like music,

[16] Cf. Bosanquet, *History of Aesthetic*, p. 215.
[17] *The New Laokoon*, p. VIII.

powerfully grip us and yet, at the same time, like plastic art, envelop us with serene clarity. It is precisely in this manner that the perfect style is revealed in every art, namely, by its capacity to remove the specific bounds of the latter without eliminating the specific advantages, and, by a wise utilization of the peculiarity of this art, to bestow upon it a more general character." [18] It was just the specific bounds, which Schiller hoped to see removed, that Lessing insisted on defining; and it was definitely in the wise recognition of these limitations, Lessing held, that each art could best achieve its perfection and its universality.

Schiller's recommendation was but a mild and circumspect prelude to the confusion which was to follow. Whereas Lessing had praised the ancients for their discriminate restraint and had recommended a return to classic standards, A. W. Schlegel disclaimed such allegiance and proudly announced: "Ancient art and poetry is intent on a strict differentiation of the disparate; romantic art and poetry delights in insoluble combinations. All things that are opposed, nature and art, poetry and prose, seriousness and humor, recollection and premonition, spirituality and sensuousness, the earthly and the heavenly, life and death—all these are fused as intimately as possible." [19] In a like

[18] 22nd letter.

[19] *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, 25th lecture.

vein, his brother, Friedrich, wrote in one of the "Fragments" in the *Athenäum:* "Romantic poetry is progressive universal poetry. . . . It embraces all that is poetic in any way, from the most extensive system of art, in turn comprising other systems, to a sigh, a kiss which the poetically creative child breathes forth in artless song."

Wackenroder's denial of Lessing's principles is hardly less strong. "An everlasting, antagonistic chasm is established between the heart that feels and the investigations of research. The former is an independent, closed, divine being that cannot be unlocked and solved by reason. . . . Whoever undermines the most beautiful and divine things in the realm of the spirit with his Why? and his eternal search for purpose and cause is, in reality, concerned, not with the beauty and divinity of things themselves, but with the concepts, the bounds and husks of things, with which he applies his algebra." [20] If we recall that Friedrich Schlegel characterized *Emilia Galotti* as a perfect example of "dramatic algebra," the reference to Lessing is all the more evident.

Madame de Staël, who had had A. W. Schlegel as a mentor during her first trip to Germany, prompts her heroine to exclaim in *Corinne:* "Let us blend all things (*laissez-nous donc tout confondre*)—

[20] *Werke und Briefe* (Jena, 1910), I, 187.

love, religion, genius, sunshine and perfumes, music and poetry";[21] Novalis considered the eyes a *Lichtklavier*, and queried: "Might not colors be the consonants of light?"; Tieck, who confessed "I know nothing lovelier than to have a confused sensation of many and all sorts of things,"[22] "thought in sound and made music with words and thoughts"; E. T. A. Hoffmann "maintained the agreement of all the impressions from the senses: 'of sound, color, and even odors'";[23] and Wackenroder held that "painting is poetry with pictures of human beings."[24] Otto Ludwig confessed that he waited for a musical mood that evoked visions, from which he proceeded to language; Nietzsche ecstatically cried: "Perhaps I shall find a philosophic matter which will permit of a musical treatment, and then I shall heap images like a barbarian who has fallen asleep before an ancient head of Venus";[25] and Wagner sought to embrace all the arts in his *Kunstwerk der Zukunft.*

Music, the art which was least congenial to

[21] Book X, chapter 5.

[22] Cf. Erika von Erhardt-Siebold, "Harmony of the Senses in English, German, and French Romanticism," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, XLVII (1932), 580, 584.

[23] L. A. Willoughby, *The Romantic Movement in Germany* (Oxford, 1930), pp. 36, 38.

[24] *Op. cit.*, I, 87.

[25] Karl Joël, *Nietzsche und die Romantik* (Jena and Leipzig, 1905), p. 279.

Lessing, became all-engrossing. It was, for the romanticists, "the language which they sensed above language, the image which they dreamed behind the image and which they insatiably longed for. Music, then, they incessantly had in mind when they thought; music, when they wrote poetry; music, when they painted." [26] Similarly, the *Märchen* lured literature to a mysterious realm of reverie where the distinctions of traditional types were dreamily brushed away. *Das Märchen ist gleichsam der Kanon der Poesie*, Novalis announced; and he illustrated his decree by writing *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* in a fairy-tale manner, while Tieck and Kleist further confirmed it with their dramas, *Der gestiefelte Kater* and *Käthchen von Heilbronn*. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* was born of "an intuition in which science and poetry are no longer to be separated." [27] Not only the various arts, but thought, faith, emotion, reality and un-reality were to be gathered into the common bosom of an all-blending reverie:

Die Welt wird Traum,
Der Traum wird Welt.

[26] Rudolf Bach, *Tragik und Grösse der deutschen Romantik* (Munich, 1938), p. 106.

[27] Fritz Strich in *Aufriss der deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (edited by Korff and Linden, Leipzig, 1931), p. 156.

Lessing's keenly austere spirit was not calculated to control these surging currents. Above gushing romantic waters, the dark pools of mysticism, and the turbulent tides of lyric effusion, *Laokoon* rises like a severe granite shaft—the least Germanic masterpiece of German literature.

XVII

THE VIRTUES OF *LAOKOON*

The foregoing criticism has been presented, not as an attempted refutation of *Laokoon*, but only as a commentary and a supplement. Minds of the temper of Lessing's and works of the calibre of *Laokoon* are not to be disposed of by sheer discourse, still less by a mere detection of errors and shortcomings. We may whittle down the opinions; but the cast of a great mind is irreducible. *Ansichten kann man wohl überwinden; Geistesgrösse niemals.* Emerson felt what we all feel: "It makes a great difference to the force of any sentence whether there be a man behind it or not."

If we take pains to discover the insufficiency of certain concepts and the impertinence of various conclusions, it is not in order to disparage Lessing or *Laokoon*—assuming for a moment that we could—but in order to protect our own minds from undue domination and to establish our own independence of thought. To subscribe largely or steadily to Lessing's point of view is to have learned nothing essential from him. For the purpose of great criticism is to exercise our minds, not to spare them.

Laokoon is like a great mountain which, at first sight, seems a perfectly solid and rounded mass. Upon closer inspection, we find it scarred by deep craters, wide rifts, and gaping chasms. And we take note of these craters, rifts, and chasms, not in order to belittle the mountain, the stature of which will always remain, but in order to keep from losing our own footing. A masterpiece, such as *Laokoon*, is not a work we cannot find flaws in; it is a work we cannot afford to lose sight of.

The enduring significance of Lessing's criticism lies, not in the statement of universally acceptable doctrines, but in the consummate formulation of principles that may be profitably reckoned with. If he seems to be stating his principles with undue sharpness and exclusion, it is, not because he pedantically believed in their finality, but because he wisely held that a clearly defined proposition is to be more effectively considered than one which is incompletely thought through and uncertainly stated. The very precision of Lessing's propositions makes them a provocation for debate, a point of departure rather than a resting-place for the mind. It is only vague and mystic assertions that assume an air of the oracular.

Lessing's familiarity with art was decidedly less intimate than Winckelmann's; and his appreciation of poetry was incomparably less sensitive than

Herder's. Yet, today, Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* and Herder's *First Critical Sylva* are known only to specialists, whereas *Laokoon* remains among the living creations of great criticism and literature. Most of Herder's fundamental objections to *Laokoon* are vital and sound. But they are uncertainly conceived and haphazardly presented. Herder instinctively feels what poetry and art should mean to us; and he is sensitively aware of that which Lessing has left unsaid; but he is at a loss to say it himself. For the things which Herder is trying to say about poetry can, in fact, not be formulated by the critic; they must be expressed by the poet himself. And so it comes that Herder feels imperfectly as a poet and expresses himself immaturely as a critic. The lines of his argument are bold, but they are blurred, while the lines of Lessing's have been brought into perfect focus. Not the least of Lessing's virtues is the clarity with which he has gauged his problem.

"Lessing, the most rational of critics, was inspired when he wrote *Laokoon;* Herder, the rhapsodist, was merely excited when he answered it." [1] But Lessing's inspiration was not the sudden flash of a moment. It was the clear, steady light which finally comes from long years of keen examination,

[1] E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge, Eng., 1935), p. 74.

the discriminate sifting of ideas and material, and the ultimate and effective alignment of these in the mind.

It is, of course, rather unfair to compare the work of an author of twenty-five with the achievement of one of thirty-seven. But it is significant that the faults, which were evident in the *First Sylva*, are still inherent in Herder's later works. He remained an author of manifold ideas, innumerable impressions, and rare flashes of intuition. But he never got to the goal of anything, for he was always on the track of something else. He could never compose a great work because he could never compose himself.

Lessing was a man of few ideas, most of them derived and none of them startling; but he was in complete command of them. The strength of *Laokoon* lies, not in Lessing's critical limitation of poetry, on the one hand, and painting and sculpture, on the other, but in his wise recognition of the limitations of criticism itself. What Lessing considers peculiar to the particular provinces of poetry and of art leaves much to be desired; but what he says in this connection is peculiarly fitted to the province of criticism itself—its capacity, its distinction, and its precision. Lessing knew exactly how far criticism could go without becoming uncertain and inept. He did not attempt to

expound what could not be expounded; he did not strive to describe what could not be described; and he did not try to formulate what could not be formulated. There is a vast area within the realm of art and of literature which his principles singularly fail to account for; but it is precisely that area which criticism is least qualified to cope with, which it can only analyze incompetently and formulate uncertainly. Lessing, a wise and consummately articulate critic, advisedly stopped at that point where the mind, if it wanders on, is apt to lose itself in the bogs of emotional vagueness or the wilderness of ideological conjecture. This is the attitude of classic decision and assurance:

> Latius regnes avidum domando
> Spiritum. . . .

But how could a mind, which *appreciated* poetry and art so little, tell genuine poets and artists what they should do? The answer is simple. "In *Laokoon*, Lessing, in the first place, doesn't tell good artists what they should do. They don't have to be told; and no one knew it better than the author who, himself a critic, had written: 'Not every critic is a genius; but every genius is a born critic: he has in himself the measure of all rules'; and again: 'O you concoctors of general rules, how little you understand art and how little

you possess of that genius which has created the models on which you base your rules and which can violate them as often as it delights in so doing!' It would have been unbecoming, to say the least, for Lessing to set himself up as a schoolmaster over competent or consummate artists when he was himself to write: 'It is the privilege of genius not to know a thousand things which every schoolboy knows; not the gathered store of his memory but that which he is able to deduce from within him, from his own feeling, constitutes his riches.' It is to incompetent artists or would-be poets and to those who indiscriminately laud such artists and poets that Lessing directs the argument of *Laokoon*. And, in the second place, Lessing does not tell these incompetent artists or would-be poets (and by implication their ill-advised followers) what they should do; he warns them what they should *not* do, or try to do." [2]

We should not forget that the area which Lessing's arguments involve is endless; a complete commentary on any one of a score of pages in his discussion would be little short of a volume in itself. Lessing's reduction of his demonstration—the bold, clear alignment of his principles and the timely introduction and effective subordination of particulars to these principles—was highly con-

[2] F. O. Nolte, *Grillparzer, Lessing, and Goethe in the Perspective of European Literature* (Lancaster, 1938), pp. 151–52.

scious and calculated. Elsewhere he characteristically wrote: *Das Genie liebt Einfalt, der Witz Verwickelung;* and a modern author has reiterated this judgment: "Simplicity, not complexity, is an attribute of genius." [3] There is constant over-simplification in *Laokoon;* but it is the over-simplification of a master. By wisely refraining from saying too many things, Lessing succeeded in saying great things.

Lessing's learning was tremendous—his achievement in this respect alone entitles him to the highest regard; and it is true that, at times, he is tempted to load his discussion with a formidable array of erudite *minutiae.* But, though his pages may be cluttered, his mind never is. That is the essential difference between Lessing, a truly great critic, and a merely great scholar. Lessing could adapt himself to the laborious pace of academic exactitude without losing the gait and mettle of a thorough-bred. Among critics he is possibly unequalled for sheer cerebral energy. One of his cardinal virtues was his astounding ability to send a clear ray of reason through a seemingly interminable maze of learning.

Lessing quibbles; he quibbles persistently. But —and here again is a significant distinction between Lessing and a strictly academic mind—he is

[3] John C. Van Dyke, quoted by Opdyke, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

constantly referring his quibbles to major problems and fundamental issues. To suit the precise taste of the most finical philologist and the most technical archaeologist, he could meticulously examine every foot of the terrain he explored; yet he continually kept the far horizon in view.

Although Lessing was largely theoretic in his discussion, he did not speculate, and he never succumbed to aesthetic jargon: there is not a single term in the whole *Laokoon* which a normally intelligent reader cannot understand and in which a critically qualified reader cannot properly detect whatever inadequacy there may be in the conception. Lessing was not the one to seek refuge behind the impenetrable haze of abstruse terminology.

There is an unmistakable cleanness in the action of Lessing's mind. And there is a bracing vigor. Although he was confined to books for the greater part of his life, there was never any pallor to Lessing's thought, and there was nothing hunched in his attitude toward life or its problems. He did not have an appreciation of the sensuous, it is to be regretted, but he did have an eye for the specific. And it was this regard for the specific that restrained him from *Grübelei*, and kept his mind from wallowing in the unprogressive heavings of a tideless basin of thought.

It does small justice to Lessing's achievement to argue that the significance of *Laokoon* was essentially temporal, that it was important in its day and that its meaning is now spent. In point of fact, the shortcomings of *Laokoon* were hardly less great and scarcely less contested in Lessing's day than they have been since. *Laokoon* was intelligently and pertinently argued against, *viva voce* as well as in letters, by Mendelssohn and Nicolai in the course of its development; upon its appearance, it was intelligently and pertinently argued against by Garve and Herder, just as it has intelligently and pertinently been argued against in every subsequent generation. But no one, no matter how successfully he has argued *against* it, has succeeded in arguing it *away*. Those critics who have held that *Laokoon* is refuted (*widerlegt*), or overcome (*überwunden*), or outlived (*überholt*), have merely announced their own prejudice and pedantry. There is no single approach to criticism, no absolute standard; and there are no universal conclusions. Lessing's approach was one of many; he pursued his course with incomparable penetration and effectiveness; and he recorded his findings in a consummate manner. What has been consummately said, may be said differently; but it cannot be better said.

"Evidently, if the Germans are to justify the

high claims they make for Lessing as a critic, they must rest them on other grounds than his intellectual originality or the fineness of his taste." [4] This judgment of Irving Babbitt is thoroughly justified; and even considerably more may be made of the indictment against Lessing. The deficiencies in Lessing's taste are glaring; there is not a single original proposition in the whole of *Laokoon;* every one of Lessing's conclusions is debatable, to say the least; and the influence of *Laokoon* was nil or next to nil. Yet it remains the greatest critical masterpiece of modern literature. Why? Because none of these indictments is final, or even fundamental.

It is precisely because Lessing's ideas were neither original nor startling that he could never set a new style or encourage a new movement. What is unique, incomparable about Lessing is the mastery of his method; and, like all supreme mastery, it can neither be successfully continued nor imitated. Lessing marks the end of a road, and not the beginning, for the very reason that he himself is not a beginner or an upstart. Like all great masters, he represents, not an initiation, but a culmination.

The fact that Lessing's critical principles and conclusions had little or no direct influence does

[4] *The New Laokoon*, p. 36.

not, however, mean that his critical activity and temper made no impression. Lessing gave German intellectual consciousness a new and higher sense of identity; his achievement marks the coming of age of the German literary mind. And the heritage he left was something stronger and deeper than mere ideas or formulas. It was a heritage of the spirit—a new, inspiring sense of confidence, strength, and independence.

By indicating the unoriginality of Lessing's ideas, we by no means discredit the power and discipline of his thought. Is the opening theme of the *Eroica* less effective because Beethoven lifted it from Mozart? Was Molière ill-advised when he intelligently plundered on every promising occasion: *je prends mon bien où je le trouve?* And what, indeed, was original about the Atreus-Thyestes legend by the time it got to the hands of Euripides, not to mention Racine and Goethe? We go to *Laokoon*, as we go to any masterpiece, not to detect *where* the creator got his material, but to see *what* he has done with it, once he has it in hand. Far from being without obligations, a great mind is the most indebted of minds. And few thinkers realized better than Lessing that nothing will survive the withering heat of the morrow that has not long been nurtured in the deep, rich soil of the past.

There is a quality in art and criticism, as in all

human enterprise, that is to be esteemed far more than originality; and that is integrity. There is, likewise, a second quality incomparably rarer than invention; and that is maturity. In the wise words of John Masefield, "maturity is, perhaps, the rarest gift of any human being." Integrity and maturity: these are the high virtues of Lessing. "Fineness of taste" we cannot ascribe to him; but we can assign to him another virtue, no less to be cherished—intellectual responsibility. Goethe's verdict is famous: "There are many others no less astute and no less cultivated. But where, again, shall we find such character?" That was not only exceptional praise of Lessing; it was also a supreme tribute to criticism. For criticism is the very foundation of Lessing's sturdy, forthright character. Harsh as he may have been towards others, he was even more unsparing towards himself. That is what distinguishes the heroic anger of Lessing from the petty insolence of Heine, the sullen egotism of Schopenhauer, the arrogant peevishness of Nietzsche, and the febrile conceit of their fellow romantics—for romanticism is, at bottom, the temperamental inability, whether sentimental or cynical, to see things in perspective, last of all one's self.

Why could Lessing with all his shortcomings still be a master? Because he *recognized* his short-

comings—clearly, honestly, resolutely. And, having recognized them, he subordinated and chastened them, and made them inactive. This is the true reward of criticism. For criticism is discipline; and it is constructive discipline. As such it is by no means to be defined as sheer correctness. It is far more profitable and delightful to follow a great mind, like Lessing's, into the by-ways of error than to walk with a mediocre mind on the highway of truth. *Aber man wird des Guten, und auch des Besten, wenn es alltäglich zu sein beginnt, so bald satt.* "The critic, unlike the philosopher and the historian, has not got to break his heart about truth. His primary concern is, not the true, but the interesting." [5] Bosanquet has noted: "When Lessing makes a mistake, he makes it thoroughly"; [6] and Lytton Strachey has written of the author of the *Lives of the Poets:* "Johnson's aesthetic judgments are almost invariably subtle, or solid, or bold; they have always some good quality to recommend them—except one: they are never right." [7] There is no occasion for regret. "Meaning is wider in scope as well as more precious in value than is truth." [8] Great critics are not usually right or, for that matter, frequently right.

[5] H. W. Garrod, *The Study of Poetry* (Oxford, 1936), p. 60.

[6] *History of Aesthetic*, p. 228.

[7] *Books and Characters* (New York, 1922), p. 74.

[8] John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization* (New York, 1931), p. 5.

They are not that obvious; nor are they given to playing safe. That is the privilege of lesser minds, and of scholars. It matters less *what* a critic says than *how* he says it, and, above all, how he backs it up. A great critic is simply the man whom we respect when we *know* he is wrong.

As we read *Laokoon* at various stages of our development, we are apt to undergo three reactions. The first is one of immature acceptance; the second is one of half-mature dissension; and the third is one of mature admiration. The first reaction comes when we still know little either about art or about criticism; the second, when we have learned to know art but are still unaware of the nature of criticism; the third comes when we know criticism as well as art and recognize that criticism is an art in itself. Then, at last, we are aware that it is not the nature of Lessing's ideas but the quality of his demonstration that matters; that *Laokoon* is, primarily, neither an appraisal of art nor an examination of poetry, but a *study in criticism;* and that Lessing is neither a teacher like Herder, nor a speculative idealist like Schiller, but an *artist in thought.*

Lessing has etched his argument on the mind of the reader just as surely and just as effectively as Dürer etched his impressions on copper. With the same deftness with which a painter handles his

brush and the same power with which a sculptor moulds his clay, Lessing handled his terms and moulded his principles. Lessing, the critic, is great for the same reason that any author is great: he is the master of his medium. And *Laokoon* is supreme for the same reason that any work of art or literature is supreme: it is a masterpiece of composition.

XVIII

CRITICISM FOR THE SAKE OF CRITICISM

In no other great work of criticism are principles more sharply formulated than in *Laokoon;* yet Lessing had no illusions as to the legislative possibilities of his treatise. Very frankly he wrote: "Whether the artist himself can derive any benefit from these inquiries, which only teach him to think clearly on those matters to which his mere feelings, in the course of his work, must unconsciously lead him: this I do not propose to decide." [1] Lessing's attitude is that which every enlightened critic takes. "Rules," Sarcey felt, "do not render any great service in criticizing any more than they do in creating. The best that can be said for them is that they may serve as directions or guideposts. . . . The first condition of having pleasure is to love, and we do not love by rule." [2] But the same critic wrote that the author of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* "possessed two things without which there can be no serious criticism: clearly defined principles and intense passion." [3] It is

[1] Blümner, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

[2] Cf. Barrett H. Clark, *European Theories of the Drama* (New York, 1930), p. 390.

[3] *Quarante ans de théâtre* (Paris, 1900), I, 161.

only through vital reference to fundamentals that criticism, or any thought, can be genuinely stirring and profitable.

Essentially, criticism is mental exercise and discipline. It has no dogmatic value, except to pedants. Accepted as a body of principles, it solves nothing. But, taken as a mental process, it stimulates our minds and sets them on the way to finding their own solutions.

There has been endless discussion as to whether the office of the critic is to praise or to blame, or to compare, or simply to examine. All these considerations are secondary. The office of the critic is to enlighten us as fully as possible; and no reasonable person will quibble about his method or his mood. Some critics do their best by isolating works; others by comparing them; some by analyzing, others by synthesizing. Most good critics will use several or all of these procedures. There is no single incontestable method, just as there is no single inevitable conclusion. Criticism "will, perhaps, increase our risks of error almost as much as our chances of discovery"; but, "in the end, it will add to our intelligence." [4]

It is true that an uncultivated mind may appreciate art strongly and even deeply, just as it feels all things strongly and deeply. But such a mind

[4] Jules Lemaître, Impressions de théâtre (Paris, 1898), X, 271.

will appreciate bad art as strongly as it appreciates good art, just as it feels a bad passion no less deeply than a good passion. It will cry over a sentimental novel as copiously as it does over *Othello;* and it will probably prefer a newspaper account of a sensational murder to both of these. The fact that the primary function of art is to provide pleasure does not imply that aesthetic pleasure should be altogether a hit-or-miss affair. Knowledge is never a detriment to artistic appreciation, as it is never a detriment to any sort of genuine appreciation. "The true critic, indeed, is he, and he only, who can teach us rightly to enjoy." [5] Intimate exposure to art will, of itself, no sooner lead to intelligent appreciation than intimate exposure to disease will, of itself, make a competent doctor. Ignorance is no more a key to artistic appreciation than it is to anything else worth-while. To a critic who argued in Whistler's studio that color was, after all, only a matter of "taste," Jimmy tartly retorted: "Tom, for once I thought you were going to get out of here without saying something foolish. Color is not a matter of *taste;* it's a matter of *knowledge.*" [6]

Art is not something to be indiscriminately drenched with, still less something to be over-

[5] Bosanquet, *Three Lectures on Aesthetic* (London, 1931), p. 35.
[6] Cf. Opdyke, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

whelmingly submerged in. Experience in its full human sense is a form of education; and it is complete and profitable only in so far as it is accounted for. Blind experience is no experience at all; and blunt perception is not worthy of the name. The aesthetic experience is like any other kind. It is a matter neither of sheer happening nor of mere impression. It must be consciously accounted for; and it is criticism alone which can lead to this ultimate comprehension. If Goethe has been considered "the greatest critic of all times"; it is largely because he has also been properly adjudged "the most conscious of men."

But the process of ever-widening consciousness is not a simple one; and its development is not toward security. The function of criticism (with all its regard for insight) is not to regulate but to agitate, not to prove but to provoke. The highest achievement in art marks not only a consummation of form but also a standardization of thought, which is stagnation. The vital reaction against such stagnation must be and always has been critical. Criticism forms the threshold of every enduring movement; the Renaissance witnessed not only the revival of ancient art but also the rebirth of Aristotelian inquiry.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes remarked: "To rest upon a formula is a slumber that, pro-

longed, means death." [7] In like spirit, Lessing wrote: "Possession makes us complacent, indolent, proud"; and he led up to this conclusion with the words: "It is not the truth which a man possesses or presumes to possess, but the earnest effort which he has made to get at the truth, that determines his worth. For it is not through truth but through the search for truth that those forces are expanded which alone contribute to his steadily developing perfection." [8]

It is only through such active interest and examination that literature and art can survive. Art, once it has been completed, is, in itself, no longer an active agent. All that can ever be active is the mind that plays upon it. A work of art is utterly dead the moment the artist lifts his hands from it. All it can ever mean, all it can ever become, is what we make of it. The most moving symphony of Beethoven is wasted sound if it falls on deaf ears; the most fascinating painting of Da Vinci is mere expanse of canvas if it stands before unseeing eyes; and the sweetest sonnet of Shakespeare is but a sequence of syllables if it strikes upon dull imagination.

After a work has had the last touches put to it by the artist, its beauty and its fate are no longer

[7] *Collected Legal Papers* (New York, 1920), p. 306.
[8] *LM.*, XIII, 24.

in his power. They are completely and forever at the mercy of posterity. The so-called vitality of a masterpiece is, in itself, inert; it must constantly be reborn in the consciousness of mankind; it must be recreated by each new generation. It is the function of criticism to foster this rebirth, "for the meaning of any beautiful thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it as it was in his soul who wrought it." If it is through creation alone that beauty is born, it is through criticism alone that it survives.

Yet, despite all this, the primary purpose of criticism is not to *explain* art or literature. Art and literature are their own explanation. Degas properly announced that "the painter speaks in paint." Likewise, the sculptor speaks in bronze or marble; the composer speaks in notes; and for such intensely characteristic idioms there is no verbal substitute, even approximate. Rembrandt, Chaucer, Bach, and their fellow artists speak incomparably better in their own names than anyone could possibly speak for them.

Nor is it the primary purpose of criticism to *interpret* art and literature. If this were so, criticism would be utterly discredited; and art and literature would be reduced to a maze of conflicting and bewildering caricatures. Interpretations vary immensely; and many of the finest are

altogether incompatible with one another. Any single "interpretation" of Shakespeare would give us but a pale and fragmentary impression of his incomparable power; and a composite of many interpretations, all of them excellent, far from reconstructing Shakespeare, would produce only an ungainly colossus.

Criticism is no more a representation of art than art is a representation of life. If the purpose of art is to "reveal" life, then it is quite superfluous. In order to know life, or nature, or reality, we should go directly to them, and not to art. Likewise, in order to know art or the "nature" of art, we should go, not to criticism, but to art itself. For, if the purpose of criticism is merely to reveal art, then it, again, is superfluous.

Criticism has nothing immediate to do with art. It immediately has to do only with our own minds. Criticism stimulates, fashions, and points our perceptive powers. It sharpens the intellect, and quickens the senses. It regenerates our spirit; and it is only through this regeneration that art, *in turn*, is revived.

Criticism, to repeat, is an art and a discipline in itself. The qualified critic is schooled and developed in his medium, just as the qualified artist is in his. Criticism is less intense than art; but it is more extensive; and, culturally, it is more

responsible. Whereas the artist cultivates a particular art, the critic cultivates the whole human mind. It was undoubtedly in this comprehensive and fundamental sense that Lessing conceived criticism when he wrote, in a note already quoted in part: "We are agreed that criticism is, in itself, a study which deserves all possible cultivation, even granted that it should, in no wise, promote genius." [9]

Criticism begins with the criticism of others; it ends in self-criticism. Self-examination, self-enlightenment, self-development: these are its ultimate, invaluable reward. If the Greeks have left to us the most enduring legacy of European civilization, it is essentially because they, beyond all other peoples, were self-critical—the most penetrating in their inquiry, the most fearless in their reasoned conclusions, and the most responsible in their equally reasoned conduct.

Tennyson was of the opinion that "good critics are rarer than good authors"; and the creator of *A Shropshire Lad*, no less eminent as a poet than as a classic philologist, has written: "Whether the faculty of literary criticism is the best gift that Heaven has in its treasures I cannot say; but Heaven seems to think so, for assuredly it is the gift most charily bestowed. Orators and poets,

[9] Blümner, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

sages and saints and heroes, if rare in comparison with blackberries, are commoner than returns of Halley's comet: literary critics are less common." [10] If this is so, it is, presumably, because criticism is decidedly more complex than creation. Artists are relatively simple beings; they are likely to appear at any place and in any age. Many of them, especially the lyric ones, are sports. Genius, a happy concurrence of incalculable factors, strikes where it listeth. It is sudden, even eruptive and haphazard. A poet may unexpectly emerge from any class: he may be a sailor, a lawyer, a peasant, or a sheer adventurer. But there is nothing eruptive or haphazard about the appearance of a critic. He is the heir of a long lineage. Criticism is essentially a cultural heritage. By the same token, our cultural heritage is primarily a critical legacy. And it is only in so far as he is critically cultivated that the artist can partake of this legacy.

Whereas the historian takes us into the past, the critic brings the past unto us. And while the artist is absorbed in the present and the scientist is pushing into the future, the critic remains at the center of humanity, the guardian of our civilized tradition. His station is, perhaps, the most significant one. We should have little need of the

[10] *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (New York, 1933), p. 1.

redemption of new truths if we could only be spared the condemnation of old errors. "Liberty! liberty!" Joubert cried. "Let us have *justice;* and there will be liberty enough for all." Valiant as discovery, and inspiring as invention may be, humanity will never find salvation in an excited flight forwards. That is not progress; it is only a form of escape—the most stirring, perhaps, but also the most delusive and the most dangerous.

Art, with all its splendor, is still insufficient. Artistic creation is never altogether free of instinct, and it is seldom altogether free of vulgarity. Animality, if not the parent of art, is still a near ancestor. There is something of the artist in every brutal tyrant. While Rome burned, Nero gleefully fiddled. Had he been pressed for a reason, he would possibly have replied, as innumerable ecstatically inept performers have subsequently been wont to, that he was not hearkening to a private caprice, but was being impelled by a cosmic urge. It is not surprising that his imperial parting shot should have been: "what an artist the world is about to lose!"

Even the finest art is brutal in its exaction. Artists have but one full devotion, and they are wholly responsible only to one thing—their medium. As far as their fellow men are concerned, artists are possibly the most selfish and cruel lot tolerated and

honored by polite society. An eminent painter has recently written: "I doubt that there is a more heartless crew than poets, painters and composers. . . . Art is so sacred the love of it covers a multitude of sins, and so we excuse ourselves." [11] To the artist, his medium is everything. It is food and drink and fire, his hope and his despair, his constant home and yet the scene of his unceasing exile. It is, at once, his dearest friend and his bitterest enemy, his slave today and his lord tomorrow. It will never forsake him, yet it is constantly eluding him, chaste as a virgin and intimate as a bawd, ever to be wooed and never to be claimed—his endless consolation and his eternal curse. It is mistress and wife to him, parent and child. To it he will sacrifice everything and everyone—including himself.

La poésie veut quelque chose d'énorme, de barbare et sauvage. Diderot, with these words, has stated but a partial truth; yet the truth that is there is incontestable. Even in the finest poetry there is still a primitive streak. At its best, art will still recall there was a time when we walked on all fours and delighted in the taste of blood.

It is criticism, and criticism alone, that has taught us to walk upright. Whereas art is born

[11] Sir John Lavery, quoted in the *New York Times Book Review*, May 12, 1940, p. 5.

of passion and fed by prejudice, criticism is born of discrimination and bred by tolerance. The former still drags along the dripping tail of our biological descent; the latter is the pure bequest of our civilized discretion.

There was undoubtedly a tremendous and lamentable aesthetic decline from the spacious days of the Renaissance to the rationalistic Age of Enlightenment—to be specific, from Shakespeare to Lessing. But, happily, there was also an ascent in critical insight: intellectual maturity, moral autonomy, and enlightened tolerance. For the author of *The Merchant of Venice*, with all his transcendent genius, the Jew was still a laughingstock, fit only for comedy. For the author of *Nathan der Weise* he has become a beautiful and enduring embodiment of humanity.

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